THE HISTORY OF ROCK

70p

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The Industry at Work

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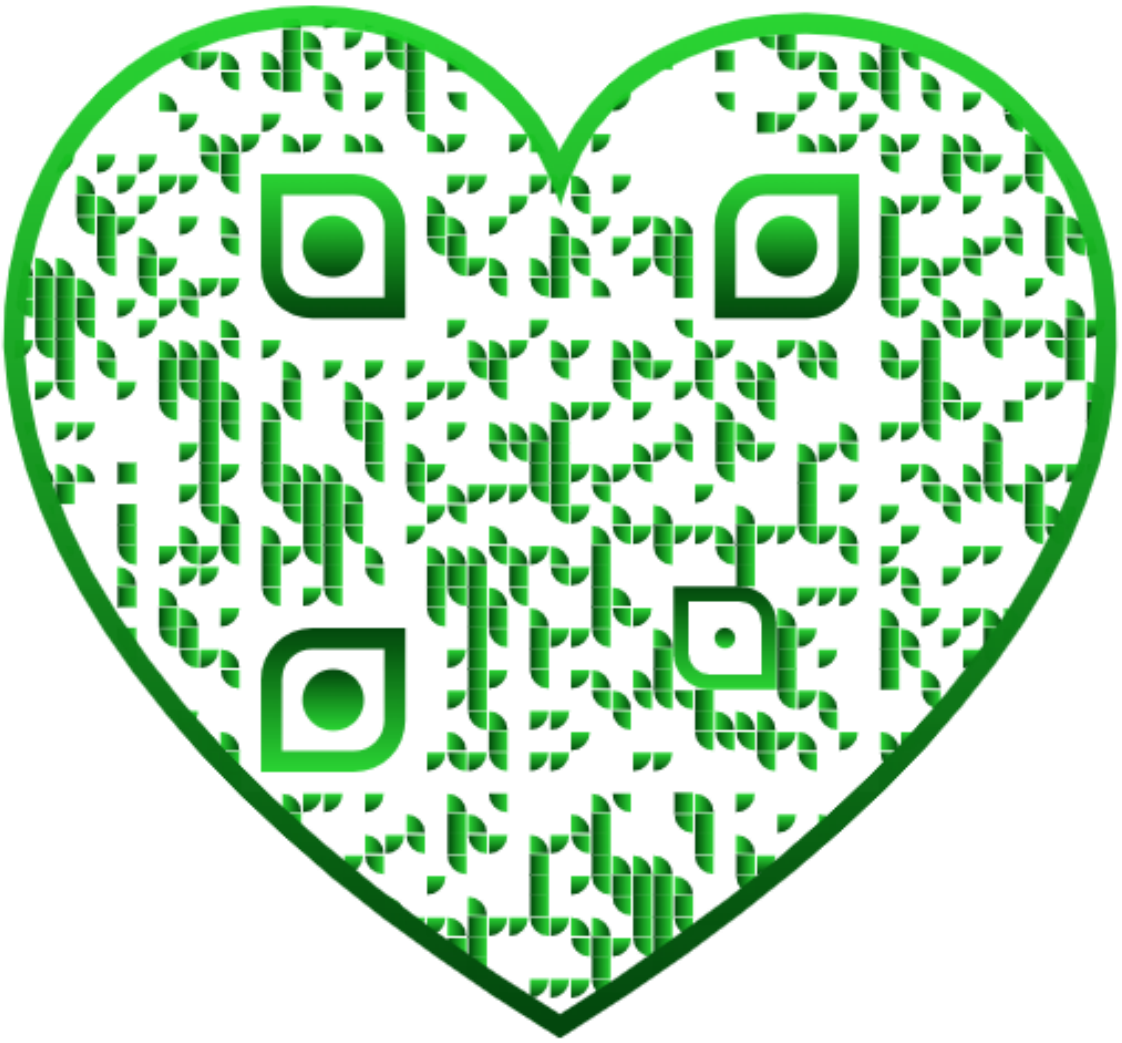

THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, two young white Jewish songwriters from Los Angeles, were responsible for some of the most popular black vocal group recordings of the Fifties. Writing and producing for the Drifters and the Coasters, they gave birth to such classics as 'Cell Block No 9', 'Framed' and 'Up On The Roof'. Their unrivalled grasp of the rhythm and blues genre gave them the chance to write several hits for Elvis Presley, and they later briefly turned their magic touch to white bubble-gum music.

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The Industry at Work

The record business of the Fifties: cruel and calculating or vital and exciting?

THE INVOLVING EXCITEMENT of a live performance by Led Zeppelin; the most precise and subtle sounds captured on the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* LP: all these are part of an industrial

process. The sounds produced, the artists' personalities and the emotions expressed are the tip of the iceberg. It is impossible to understand rock without understanding the business environment in which it operates – a spectrum of interests which ranges from the technology of working with vinyl granules to the marketing of records, and which has included almost

disinterested scientific enquiry alongside bribery, corruption and sometimes violence.

Rock is music for the market-place – few would deny that. Some would argue that this gives it its unusual power; any singer or group that struggles to the top and remains there has to have a real attraction for millions of people who are prepared to part with large sums of money. This argument is closely connected to the theory that any art form needs not only the stimulus of the individual's need for expression, but also a demanding audience who can appreciate the product. In rock, the connection between audience and artist is very strong; quite apart from the constant recycling of rock stars and the emergence of new musicians from within the audience, there is an inescapable commercial link. If a group's records fail to sell, then the group tends to cease making records. If no-one turns up to a singer's gigs, then he will not receive a subsidy to play to empty halls.

Against this argument there is another point of view: namely, that over-concentration on commercial considerations and the relentless competition involved in the record business leads to a reliance on safe, tested styles; that true individual expression is inevitably squeezed out in the search for artists who can appeal to the widest possible market; and that because companies tend to be run by businessmen rather than musicians, they frequently reject worthy artists in favour of meretricious trash. Certainly, in the Fifties, many companies did not understand the rise of rock'n' roll, and were convinced that it could be replaced by some other fad (such as calypso); and an essential element of the recording industry up to 1963 was the production of a string of fads and novelties (from packs of singing dogs to a singing nun) which were foisted upon the public.

The structure of the record companies and their ability to deal with the new music had a determining effect on the course of rock in the Fifties and Sixties. The aspirations of the in-

dependent record labels and the problems of the major companies defined their attitudes to musicians. Many artists found their careers contracting or expanding (often at bewildering speed) because of business considerations they could hardly understand.

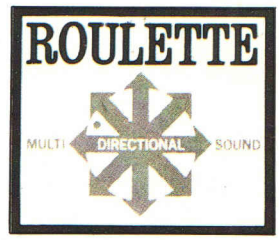
The rock'n'roll boom had spawned numerous so-called 'independent' record labels, which were struggling hard to survive in a cut-throat industry. Meanwhile, the major companies were fighting to regain their former pre-eminence in popular music. There were fortunes to be made, enormous risks to be taken. In the process, any long-term musical considerations often took second place. Record companies are money-making ventures, which are dealing with a commodity; the complication comes from the fact that unlike, say, soap-

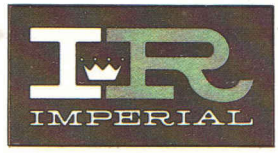
flakes, this commodity has enormous emotional rather than practical significance for the people who buy it. But if the company feels it can cynically manipulate these mass emotions in order to sell more of its product, it will almost certainly do so.

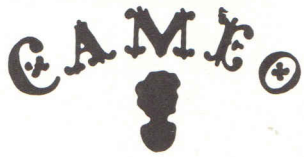
Business considerations did not, however, necessarily have a negative effect. A company like Atlantic Records, run by men with an unquenchable enthusiasm for black music, was able to bring the best out of singers and musicians and to develop their work into styles which were both satisfying and popular.

Ultimately, of course, the question of how far the industry helped or hindered rock cannot be answered. The music is inextricably linked to the world of commerce; and this, with both drawbacks and advantages, provides one of the intriguing paradoxes which give rock so much vigour and energy.

ASHLEY BROWN







The logos of some of the Fifties' most important record labels. Sun's Sam Phillips discovered Elvis, while Atlantic promoted black music. Imperial (with Fats Domino) and Ace pioneered the sounds of New Orleans, and King and Jubilee were two of the main R&B companies. Then, the boom of the late Fifties was led by firms like Liberty and Del-Fi on the West Coast and by Cameo, Roulette and Musicor in the East.

FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL

Did competition between majors and indies help or hinder rock?

DURING THE FORTIES and Fifties, at a time when giant conglomerates were starting to squeeze small companies out of the market in most industries, a curious reversal was taking shape in the record business. This was an industry that had been owned from the outset by a handful of major companies. Before 1940, with few exceptions, Columbia, RCA-Victor and Decca (and their various subsidiaries) held a virtual monopoly on record production. The early independents, including Savoy (founded 1942), Apollo (1943), National (1944) and Aladdin (1945), were the first to recognise the market for rhythm and blues in the Forties. The growing demand for R&B and country and western, and to some extent modern jazz, allowed a host of new indies to start up late in the decade and in the early Fifties. These companies included Atlantic, Imperial, King, Chess, Jubilee, Dot, Starday, Vee-Jay, Modern, Specialty, Duke-Peacock, Excello, Sun and Meteor. By this time the existing majors had been joined by Capitol (1942), Mercury and MGM (both in 1946).

This explosion of record companies, pouring out new artists and musical styles, reflected a growth in the market resulting from the return of a million or so young people to civilian life after 1945 and from other social forces such as the influx of Southern populations to the industrial centres of the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast to fill jobs produced by the war. This not only created a healthy, urban market for ethnic music, from hillbilly hoedowns to Delta blues, but also sparked hybrid forms, notably the big-city blues styles that used electric instruments.

Between 1947, when Roy Brown recorded 'Good Rockin' Tonight', and 1954, when Elvis Presley created the first successful fusion of black and country blues forms, all these forces worked together to build the ultimate inheritor of all the varied grass-roots music traditions of America: rock'n'roll. This process was presided over by the indie labels.

Contrary to some romantic popular conceptions, these labels were not run by idealistic, visionary music lovers. A few label bosses, like Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun at Atlantic and Sam Phillips of Sun Records, could claim an honest love for R&B, but most of their competitors were tough, avaricious, and sometimes appallingly short-sighted small-time businessmen, frequently record-shop owners, who spotted a local demand for some specialised music that the majors weren't meeting. It was their good fortune that such local markets turned out to have their counterparts nationwide, and that this specialised music would soon be taken up by millions of young white record buyers.

To understand why such a lucrative field was left to these men, it is necessary to understand how the major labels worked, and why they were not equipped to respond to rapid changes in the music.

How the majors worked

The essential difference between the majors and the indies was not merely size, but the fact that the majors owned their own distribution systems. To this day, control of distribution remains the central issue in what music gets heard in America – a point not always grasped by non-Americans. To service the vast expanse of the American continent, the majors set up networks of branch distributors, usually consisting of 15 or so facilities, each servicing several states from a huge warehouse with rank upon rank of sales people, promotion men and administrators. Such massive overheads have put more than one major out of business, for without consistent hits the level of record sales needed to offset costs could not be maintained. In other parts of the world, the majors have sensibly reduced their risk by making these facilities available to smaller labels for a fee, but in the States they sought to eliminate competition by jealously guarding their means of distribution.

Above: George 'Hound Dog' Lorenz and other DJs helped publicise rock in its early days. Below: The Crew Cuts recorded for Mercury, specialising in smooth cover versions of R&B songs that first appeared on smaller labels.

The advantage of branch distribution was that a company could deliver hit products anywhere in the country with speed and coordination. The disadvantage was that this national scope tended to dictate a concentration on artists with all-round, mainstream appeal. For decades the majors had taken great pains to groom young singers and then transform them into seasoned stars, matching them up with songs, arrangers and orchestras as they saw fit. The A&R men in charge of all this may have been aware that a vital new music was emerging, but their usual response was to wait until a hit song appeared in the 'race music' charts and then dish up whitewashed versions of the same tunes with their own singers.

Such an approach made sense for them, since they had spent years establishing these singers, and there was a common belief that rock'n'roll was a passing fad that did not justify a long-term investment in its performers. Between 1954 and 1956, Mercury 'covered' Atlantic's hit 'Sh-Boom' with the Crew Cuts and Dot successfully covered the early hits of Fats Domino and Little Richard with Pat Boone. It was impossible for the indies to saturate the market with their original versions in the way that the majors could with their copies.

Forces for change

Two things worked to change all that and create a climate where the indies could overcome their distribution limitations and forge ahead at the expense of the majors. First and foremost the 'real' rock 'n'roll, which had been confined to the rural South and the urban ghettos, was no longer unknown to the white suburban masses. Initially radio had instinctively rejected this new music, agreeing with the majors that it was crude, immoral and distasteful. But it was discovered, first by the more adventurous and then by everyone

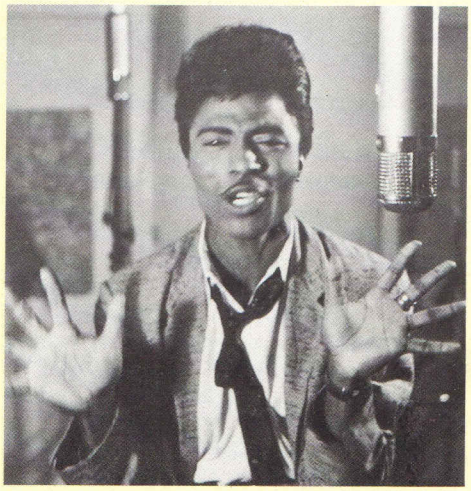
else, as pioneering DJs like Freed, George 'Hound Dog' Lorenz, and Hunter Hancock spread the word (and the music). Another key factor was Dick Clark's 'American Bandstand' show, seen daily on television by millions of teenagers. Though Clark has taken the rap for bringing conformity to rock'n'roll, the fact is that he was the first to televise the wild, earthy rock 'n'rollers, from Chuck Berry to Jerry Lee Lewis, graphically depicting the rebellious abandon behind the music.

With the mass audience now firmly addicted to authentic rock'n'roll, the indies began reaping their share of the hits. And as they did, their own form of distribution became more powerful. There arose a system of independent regional distributors, doing basically the same job as the majors' branches though only on behalf of the hundred or more labels they might represent and with strictly defined territories.

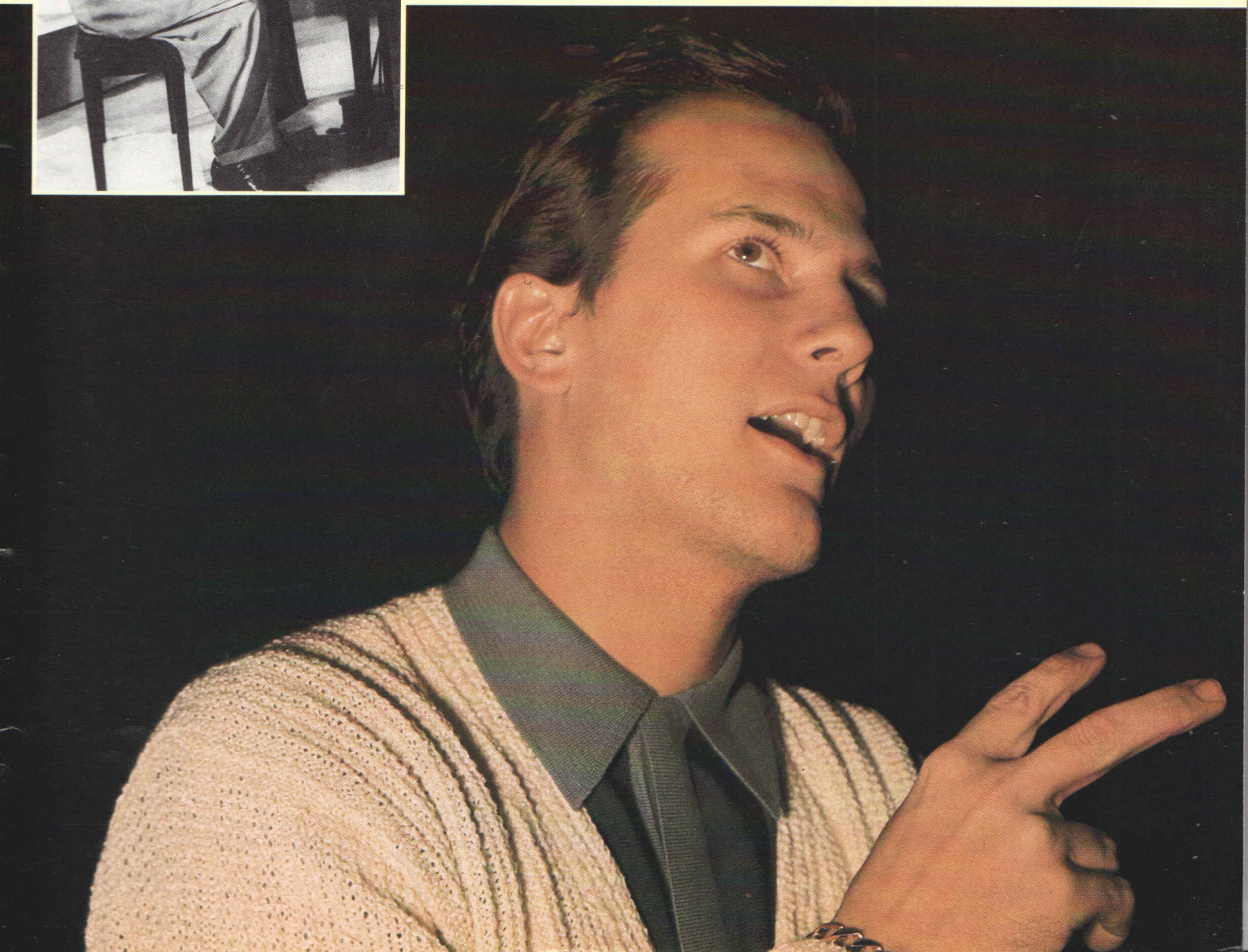
These distributors had their own promotion people whose job it was to convince radio stations that a new record could be a hit in their market. As a result many records were top hits in some cities while remaining unknown in others. The aggressiveness and ingenuity of some of these promoters helped create the free-wheeling radio scene of the era, when literally hundreds of new records were not only being released each week but also getting enough airplay to test their worth.

The majors, for all their wealth and experience, were simply left in the dust. For a solid decade, from 1956 until about 1966, while the majors sat on the sidelines, a sprawling industry of independents mushroomed, grew to insane proportions, produced an estimated 150,000 record titles, and made possible rock'n'roll's heyday.

During this era some 500 significant indie labels flourished, some with only one hit, others with dozens. Some had a catalogue with fewer than 10 releases whose names are revered today by collectors, others released hundreds and hundreds. It was a golden age for records and



Fats Domino (left) and Little Richard (right): two of rock's greatest stars. But in the hard competition of the Fifties' record business, their discs could be covered by white singers like Pat Boone (below), whose versions might sell as well or even better than the originals.



for music. Ready access to radio encouraged labels to release enormous numbers of 45s by new artists, opening up the music to all kinds of experimentation. It gave a whole generation of artists, songwriters, producers, recording studios, promoters, song pluggers and studio musicians an opportunity to learn and practise their craft, and to build a tremendously exciting industry whose echoes are still heard, and whose products are still marvelled over by rock'n'roll enthusiasts the world over.

A generation of indies

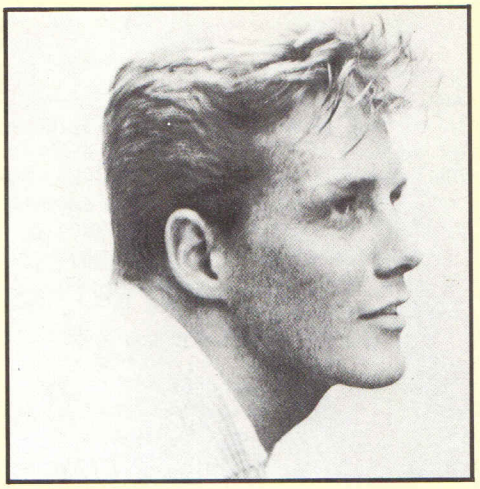
The first generation of indies had specialised in the blues and country fields (some, like King and Sun, in both) and most had a local or regional base. With the growth of independent distribution these labels were able to seek a national audience. Thus the Sun label brought the Memphis sound (Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash) to the world, while the rhythm and blues of New Orleans proved its universal appeal on Imperial (Fats Domino, Smiley Lewis), Specialty (Little Richard, Lloyd Price), Aladdin (Shirley & Lee), Ace (Huey 'Piano' Smith, Jimmy Clanton) and Minit (Ernie K. Doe, Benny Spellman, Irma Thomas). Chicago blues and soul was heard on Vee-Jay (Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker, Jerry Butler) and Chess (Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley).

While these companies were enjoying their first national hits new kinds of indies were entering the scene. On the one hand were producers, songwriters and even DJs who ran their record labels from the musical and recording side, while others dealt with the business. And on the other hand were the businessmen who did not mind the cut-throat competition, men who saw the true commercial potential of rock'n'roll and meant to cash in on it. These men built labels that survived, often with the help of reputed underworld connections, and made vast fortunes.

A new array of record companies came to the fore from 1957 or so onward. From New York and Philadelphia came Roulette, Swan, Chancellor, Big Top, Cadence, Carlton, End, Gee, Gone, Jamie, Josie, Laurie, Bell, Musicor, Old Town, Cameo-Parkway, Scepter-Wand, and on the West Coast were Liberty, Del-Fi, Keen, Dore, Era, Rendezvous and Challenge. It was a boomtown industry, wide-open and virtually lawless. To survive, you had to be a hustler among hustlers and many were wiped out without knowing what hit them.

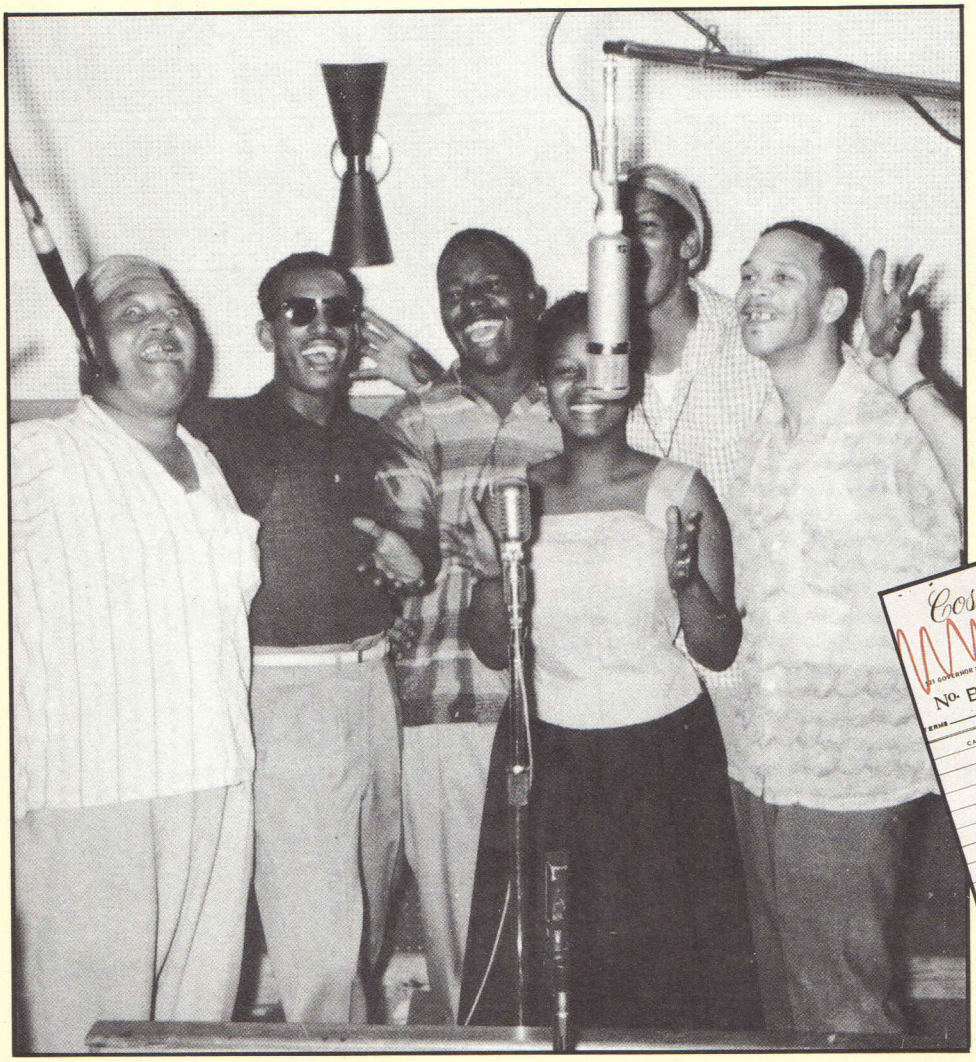
A cut-throat business

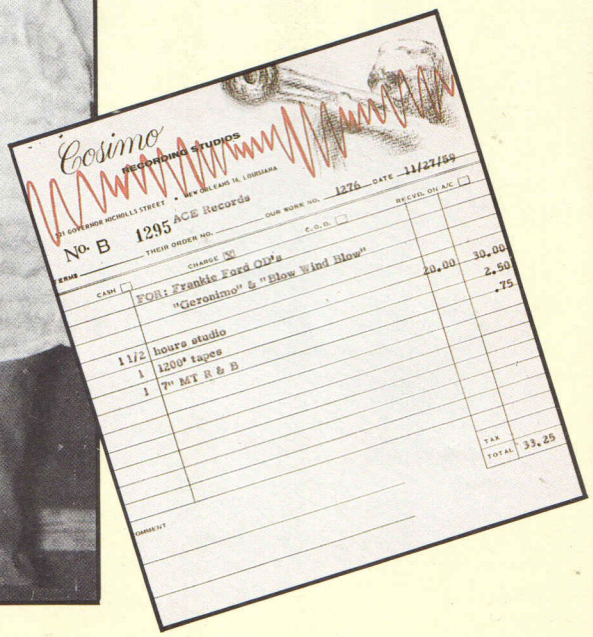
Consider the following scenario. A small label in New Orleans puts out a song that



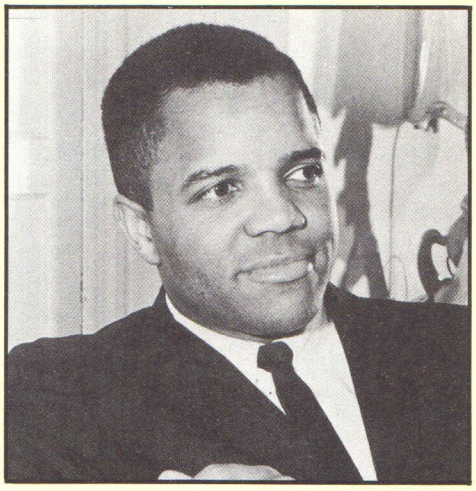
sells 30,000 copies in the South in the first two weeks. Soon the owner gets a call from a New York company that wants to license the record for national distribution. Unwilling to settle for 1-cent-per-record royalties (which he may never see, knowing the company's reputation), he says no. Instead he lines up 25 indie distributors across the country, each of whom orders 10,000 copies. Scraping up all his cash, he pays 25,000 dollars to manufacture and ship these orders. He then learns that half are to be given to DJs to sell through their own record shops in exchange for spins, and that he won't be paid for them. A week later the distributors come back with reorders totalling 500,000: the record is a smash. He begs for payment on the ones sold, but the answer is no. Desperate, he signs a note with the pressing plant and two weeks later he has the records.

In the meantime a million pirated copies have appeared in stores nationwide, looking just like his except that the label colour is slightly different. The plant forecloses,





Left: Some of Cosimo Matassa's New Orleans sessioneers, who formed one of the most notable house bands, pose for the camera. Below: A bill from Cosimo to Ace Records for a recording session.



taking ownership of the master and maybe all his other assets. The distributors say they won't pay until he produces another hit recording.

He goes to his lawyer, who points out that it would cost 10,000 dollars apiece to sue the distributors, and two or three years in court. Realising the only way out is to cut a follow-up hit with the artist, he goes looking for him, only to be told a guy from New York had been there with a shiny new Cadillac and a fistful of cash. The artist is gone. There's nothing left but bankruptcy.

This grim story and others like it were played out, time and again, during these years. There was no way to win except to play the game, or somehow outsmart the big companies. One of the few to outsmart them successfully was Phil Spector, who launched his Philles label in 1961 with the avowed intention of retaining 100 per cent control. He always got paid because he proved his ability to make every release a hit, but the major distributors resented him for it, and when he faltered after about five years they watched with satisfaction as Philles went under.

But Spector was the exception; most joined the system. Under this regime you accepted the fact that certain companies had a close understanding with the distributors, the pressing plants, and whoever was responsible for pirating hit records in order to keep their own products immune from ripoffs. If you wanted a hit, you had to give one of these companies a share. The system further extended to certain DJs who were paid to give exposure to the records of some companies and blackball those of others that didn't 'cooperate'.

The underworld played a key role in all this, particularly in the Northeast where it exerted great control over the trucking and warehousing industries, nightclubs, and countless people who were somehow on the payroll. The record companies not directly controlled by hoods were probably forced to cut them in somehow, though a few managed to survive on the strength of one major artist – such as Cadence with the Everly Brothers – long enough to diversify or later sell out to one of the majors.

It was a rough and ruthless system, one effect of which was to discourage creative

Opposite and above: Important indie owners, from left: Bob Crewe (New Voice, Dynovoice), Bert Berns (Shout, Bang), Don Kirshner (Dimension) and Berry Gordy (Motown and Tamla). Below: Cat was a subsidiary of Atlantic.

people from being a part of it. This in turn led to the emergence of independent record producers, a set-up that was virtually unknown before 1960. The traditional method was to have a single band, orchestra or group of session musicians, and a small staff of arrangers and songwriters at each label, to provide material and backing for all the artists.

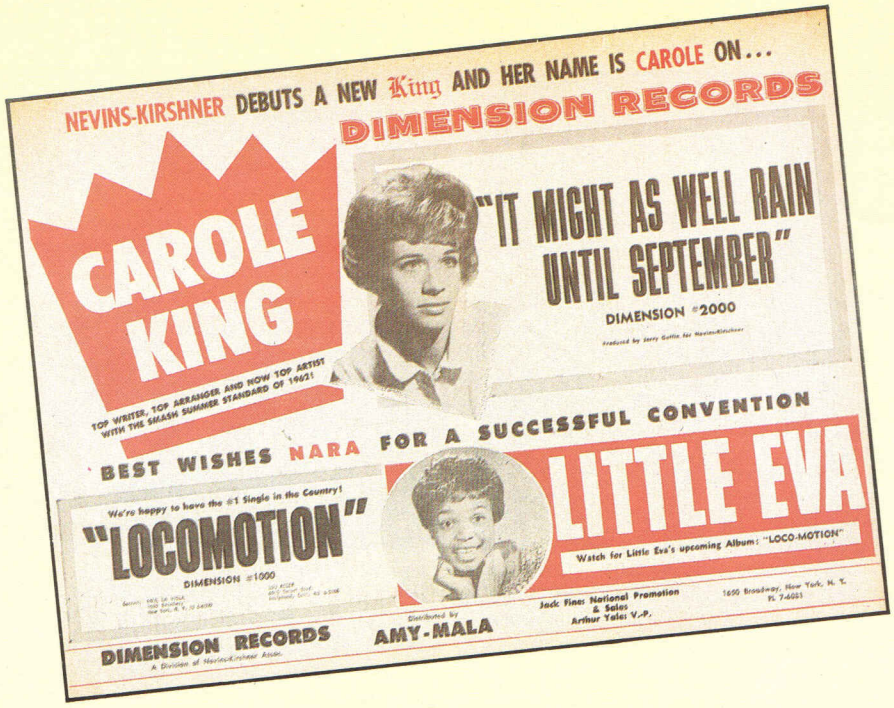
Such a method had mixed blessings. There were some great house bands, like the one at Cosimo's studio in New Orleans that turned out hundreds of classic tracks over the years, or the group that backed all the early Motown sessions, or some of the New York aggregations that featured anonymous performances by some of the great jazz players like Dizzy Gillespie, or allowed brilliant talents like King Curtis to make a steady living. But for the most part the new independent companies were as bad as the majors in their contempt for rock'n'roll. Using bored session musicians with no feel for the music, they cranked out endless streams of bouncy little tunes for manufactured teen idols. Especially notorious for this were ABC-Paramount, whose idea of a rock'n'roll singer was Paul Anka, and the Philadelphia labels like Cameo-Parkway and Chancellor, whose artists included Chubby Checker, Bobby Rydell, Fabian, and Frankie Avalon. (This scene was captured well in the 1980 film *The Idolmaker*, based on the career of Bob Marcucci who owned the Chancellor label.)

Distinctive sounds

The real flowering of indie records came in the years 1961-66, when a generation of creative talents entered the music business and adapted the prevailing system to their own ends. As songwriters or producers (usually both), their approach was to scour the streets for teenage talent, which they moulded in the recording studio according to their own ideas, controlling everything to achieve the desired product. They then placed the masters with one of the established labels, leaving the dirty business to others while they went back to the studio to make more records. As these people proved themselves, they were able to have label identities of their own, though ownership and distribution was always kept within the system.

One music publisher, Don Kirshner, built an empire by supplying songs to the indie labels (and the majors), who desperately needed something to put on the millions of records they were now able to sell. His stable of writers included Carole King and Gerry Goffin (some 200 songs and 80 chart hits from 1961 to 1966), Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil (300 songs, 50 hits), Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich (300 songs, 100 hits), and a lot of 'minor' talents like Neil Sedaka, Howie Greenfield, Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart, and Neil Diamond.

Goffin and King later went on to have a label of their own (Tomorrow) as did many other songwriters of the period. Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who had produced and written R&B hits for years



Dimension steamed ahead in 1962 with hits by Carole King and Little Eva. Right: Little Eva is pictured in front of label-owners Don Kirshner and Al Nevins (left), and writers Gerry Goffin and Carole King.

independently, founded Red Bird Records and later sold it to George Goldner. Producer/songwriter Bob Crewe, in addition to countless hits by the Four Seasons and others, had hits on his own labels New Voice, Dynovoice and Crewe. Songwriter/producer Bert Berns ran the Bang and Shout labels besides working for Atlantic and other labels. In Los Angeles, producer/manager Lou Adler (an associate of Kirshner's) was involved in the Colpix and Dimension labels, and eventually started Ode. Songwriters Steve Barri and P. F. Sloan had an outlet in the Dunhill label.

These people were young, in their early to mid twenties, and very hip. They were into the beat scene, the jazz and folk movements, Zen and poetry. Even though they were writing disposable trash for the kiddies, they couldn't help but put a lot of themselves into it, creating in the process hundreds of timeless classics, songs that directly inspired writers like John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan, and the others who took rock to its next phase.

A new black industry

While all this was going on, another group of indie producers found their own way of beating the system: they set up their own system. These were blacks who believed they could survive within a closed world of black radio stations, specialist distributors and a supportive public. The early Sixties was a crucial time in black music, as long-established styles of blues and rock'n'roll gave way to the smoother, more sophisticated soul style introduced by Sam Cooke, Jerry Butler, Curtis Mayfield, Ben E. King and others.

Young black producers saw the chance to be truly independent. Berry Gordy Jr, after a series of hits with Marv Johnson on United Artists, started the Tamla and Motown labels which became a magnet for the best black talent, and was able to become a leading indie by turning out hit after hit. In Chicago, the black-owned Constellation label gave outlet to artists such as Gene Chandler and Curtis Mayfield. In Philadelphia, Gamble and Huff were tiring of writing teen fodder for Cameo-Parkway and ready to go out on their own. In New Orleans, the leading session players were fed up with making hits for white companies and started their own label, AFO, as an artists' cooperative. Unfortunately, after brief success with Barbara George ('I Know') AFO was forced out of business. In Memphis, the Stax label took on its own identity after early releases through Atlantic. Everywhere, the new black industry was gaining a firm foothold.

These black labels, and other later ones, escaped the problems of the late Sixties (when radio played so few new records that many indies went bankrupt) because of their success in separating themselves from the pop industry. Like many country and western indies in the South, they relied on such a tight group of distributors and stations that they were able to carry on unhindered. Black labels like Motown and Philadelphia International became the leading independents in the early Seventies, while smaller black production companies became the first to be offered access to the majors' distribution systems via custom label deals around the same time.

The rock'n'roll/pop indies were unable to make this transition because they could not hang onto their public once they were deprived of radio exposure. They disappeared almost overnight, though many of the larger ones like Laurie, Era and Roulette survived by recycling past hits.

Ironically, it was the vitality and excitement of the music produced by the indies in the early Sixties that most inspired the groups of the British invasion, whose success in America helped weaken the indies and strengthen the majors to the point where the change in radio policy could be fatal.

In England there was no tradition of independent records. The few indies that existed before 1966 (chiefly Oriole and Ember) were exceptions that proved the rule: everything else was owned and controlled by EMI, Decca, CBS, Pye and Phonogram. All these companies, with the exception of Pye, had their own affiliates in America, so most of this great outpouring of talent (and hits) fell automatically into the hands of the majors.

Even then, they were slow on the uptake. Capitol initially passed on the Beatles, allowing Vee-Jay and Swan to have a last go. They also passed on Gerry and the Pacemakers, who went to Laurie, and the Dave Clark Five, who landed on CBS. But the bulk of British talent went to the majors – an effortless supply of free hit product that brought them back into the mainstream, encouraged them to set up their own rock'n'roll subsidiaries that gave additional competition to the indies, and strengthened their own distribution networks. If the Beatles had been born in Cleveland, one could imagine, we might have an altogether different set of major labels today.

The struggle between indie and major is a continuing part of the music industry, and may always be. With historical perspective, we can see that during the 10 years or so when the indies held sway, there was a sense of excitement and a rush of revolutionary change in music and culture absent from the corporate-controlled years before and after. Clearly, when the incentive exists for entrepreneurs to gamble on new ideas, extraordinary growth and progress can be made. Inevitably, when that happens, the majors can't resist trying to kill the golden goose. And then the whole process starts all over again.

GREG SHAW

CALYPSO, COMEDY AND THE CREEP

The world of fads, novelties and one-hit wonders

AS ROCK'N'ROLL HIT NEW HEIGHTS of world-wide acceptance in the latter half of the Fifties, bringing unprecedented record sales and box-office receipts, the international record industry adopted an apparently illogical mood of pessimism. Despite rock's current success, the music moguls were already searching for the new style which would supplant rock when the fans inevitably (or so the companies thought) tired of it. And whatever this was, the moguls mused, it was vital to find it first.

Maybe there was some justification for the feeling of panic amidst all the prosperity. Rock did fade somewhat in the United States towards the end of the decade, though it continued unabated almost everywhere else. But the record industry, while still maintaining its interest in rock, turned to a whole series of musical fads and novelties. And that mish-mash of a musical mix threw up a whole roster of those tragic figures known as 'one-hit wonders'.

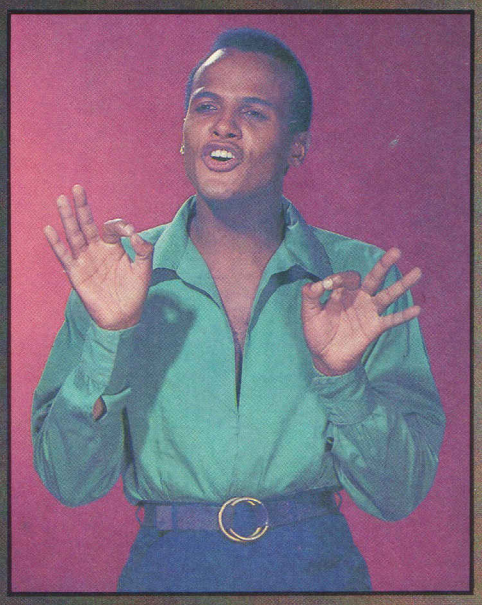
Skiffle, traditional jazz, calypso, Mexican jazz-pop, comedy, novelty instrumentals, emotional European ballads, hits by sub-teenagers, Latin-American rhythms and death songs all had booms of various sizes as the industry seized on original hits and duplicated them. Some fads survived for a number of years; there were also one-off mind-bogglers including Wink Martindale, who spoke, rather than sang, 'Deck Of Cards', a cover of a 1948 country hit and one of the most sickening quasi-religious records ever produced.

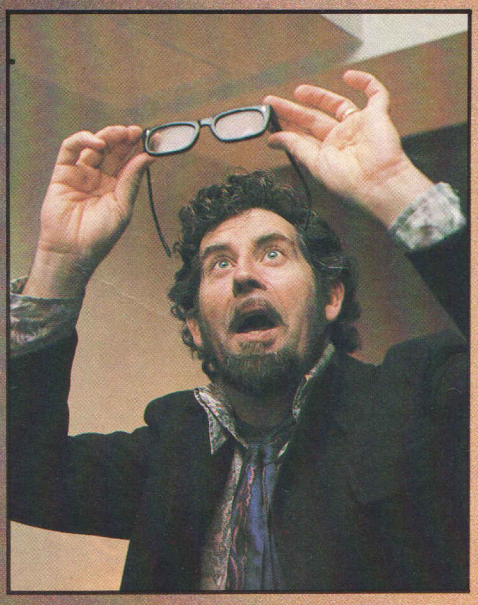
Two of the Fifties' most popular crazes were skiffle and traditional jazz. Lonnie Donegan, high priest of skiffle, made both the British and US Top Ten in early 1956, a couple of years after Bill Haley first shook, rattled and rolled in the chart. Skiffle, as a musical form, dated back to the Chicago jug-bands of the Twenties when jazz instruments were replaced by kazoos, tea-chest basses and washboards. Skiffle triggered off a whole do-it-yourself music craze, starting in Britain, and – for a year or so – ran alongside the emergent rock'n'roll boom, though with fewer star performers.

Jazz makes the charts

Chris Barber, in whose jazz band Donegan had played banjo, caught up with his former sideman at the tail-end of 1959 with the million-selling 'Petite Fleur', featuring Monty Sunshine on clarinet. Thus was launched the foot-tapping trad jazz fad, seen as a likely successor to the 'fading' foot-stomping rock. For a while, the 'Three Bs' – Chris Barber, Kenny Ball and Mr Acker Bilk – rivalled the 'Three Rs' as talking-points in schools throughout Europe. Jazz had never before snared such a young audience.

The jazz band led by Chris Barber (right), hit in 1959 with 'Petite Fleur', while Mr Acker Bilk (far right) followed suit two years later with 'Stranger On The Shore'.





There were offshoot success stories in fields other than the traditional and skiffle areas of jazz. Early on the scene came the Temperance Seven, for instance, playing music of the Twenties' dance bands and dressing up to match visual authenticity with accurately-reproduced sounds. The band attained cult status, topping the UK chart with 'You're Driving Me Crazy' in 1961. This was the year that modern jazz, though by no means so widely accepted as trad, had its moments, notably through the Top Ten single 'Take Five' by the Dave Brubeck Quartet. All kinds of 'new' instrumental sounds were put out, more in hope than confidence, by record companies all anxious to be first in the field.

Dick Hyman's million-seller 'Moritat' – the theme for the Brecht/Weill *Threepenny Opera* and better-known as 'Mack The Knife' – was a solo showcase for swing harpsichord. Two drummers, Cozy Cole

The seductive and the spectacular: calypso crooner Harry Belafonte (above left) and wobble-board champion Rolf Harris (above). Jazz, too, had its devotees: the Temperance Seven (left) were UK chart-toppers in 1961, while the more modern Dave Brubeck (below) scored with 'Take Five' in that same year.

and Sandy Nelson, took the percussive arts into the charts, the former, a jazz veteran, with 'Topsy', and the latter with 'Teen Beat' and 'Let There Be Drums'. But this was just a passing fancy. Guitarist Duane Eddy offered a more lasting new fashion by playing the melodies of his hits on the bass instead of the top strings of his instrument, thereby founding a valid tradition of rock instrumentals.

The calypso craze

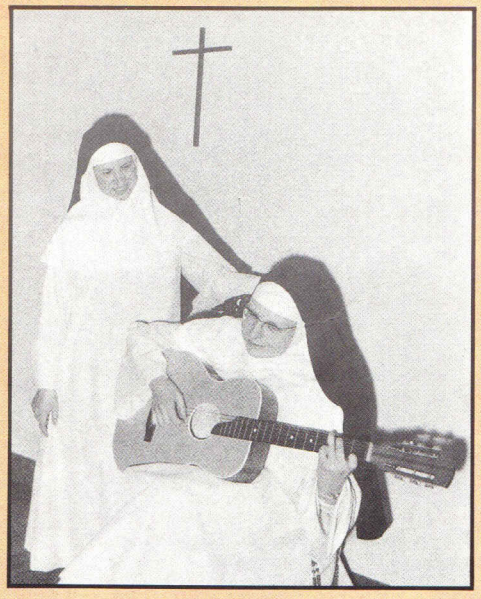
There were occasional periods of promotional pressure on various areas of established music forms: folk, gospel and Latin-American records enjoyed spasmodic outbreaks of worldwide success, as the record business convinced itself that these styles were about to replace rock'n'roll. Calypso music was an example of this, and turned one-time actor Harry Belafonte into a cult personality. A tall and handsome Negro, he had become disenchanted with pop formats and picked up on calypso. The album *Calypso* included 'Banana Boat Song', a million-selling single in 1957, and turned him into an international celebrity.

Arthur Lyman went for even more exotic sounds, highlighted on his 'Yellow Bird' hit in 1961. Cow-bells and the jawbone of an ass were among the devices employed to bolster more orthodox instrumental sounds, while his musicians imitated bird-calls to give the impression they were playing in the rain forests of Brazil. Despite widespread participation in the calypso boom by such singers as Shirley Bassey, calypso lacked the solid roots that other Caribbean styles such as reggae were later to display and it fell by the wayside.

The record moguls also turned gratefully to Europe, genuinely believing that an Italian boom might be inspired by such records as Domenico Modugno's 'Volare', or a German trend would be started by Ivo Robic's 'Morgen' – the first, and probably last, German-sung item to break into the American singles chart.

There was even room for Rolf Harris and his 'wobble-board', as he soared into the UK and US Top Tens in 1960 with 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport'. It seems that Harris had placed an oil painting on an oil heater to dry. The backing board got hot, so he wobbled it back and forth to cool it. The sound he obtained was utilised as background for his kangaroo saga, and 50,000 wobble-boards were sold in Australia alone.

For a while, the music business decided there might be a future in finding the youngest possible pop artists to meet the needs of a youthful audience. They took as their lead Frankie Lymon, who was only 13 when he topped the charts with the Teenagers' 'Why Do Fools Fall In Love?' (he died after a drug overdose before the age of 30). The results of Lymon's success included the rise of Helen Shapiro, who made the charts while still at school, and Laurie London, who took 'He's Got The Whole World In His Hands' into the UK Top Twenty at the age of 13.



Among other one-off pop triumphs were the Singing Nun (Sister Sourire from Belgium) whose 'Dominique' rose to Top Ten level in 1963 and a pack of Singing Dogs that charted in the US in 1955 with a medley of songs, including 'Jingle Bells'. A fad, yes; a trend, no.

Playing for laughs

But there were two major types of novelty which were to prove significant, one of these being comedy. The songs written by Mike Stoller and Jerry Leiber for the Coasters in the late Fifties, notably 'Yakety Yak' and 'Charlie Brown', were humorous but quality pop which travelled the world and somehow overcame all language barriers. There was, admittedly, humour in the performances of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley,

Above: Singing nun Sister Sourire (with guitar) achieved an unlikely US Number 1 in 1963. Below: The 15-year-old Helen Shapiro leaves school in 1961 for a brief chart career.

but the Coasters were given the freedom to play strictly for laughs with great success. The songs dealt with subjects a teen audience could identify with, and their appeal was reflected in regular chart success.

Elsewhere around the world, various professional comedians made disc debuts with specially-written material. Bernard Cribbins, in Britain, was particularly successful in the early Sixties with 'Hole In The Ground' and 'Right Said Fred'.

In contrast, the Chipmunks were a fictional comedy group created by David Seville, a songwriter of repute under his real name of Ross Bagdasarian. On his composition 'Witch Doctor' he used the gimmick of fooling around with the speed of the vocal tracks to create strange, high-pitched singing effects. The follow-up, 'The Chipmunk Song', named Alvin Chipmunk after Alvin S. Bennett, head of Seville's record company, Liberty, and Simon and Theodore after other Liberty executives. 'The Chipmunk Song' was acclaimed as the best comedy record of 1958.

All kinds of studio-created sound effects were fed into one-shot recordings in the hope that they'd sell, but predictably many of them flopped dismally. The record industry was trying too hard to come up with something new, still unable to believe that rock'n'roll really was a long-term project. Hit songs like 'Gilly Gilly Ossenfeffer Katzenellen Bogen By The Sea' and 'Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka-Dot Bikini' bore titles to raise a giggle or twist a tongue. Sometimes the whole spluttering and erratic world of pop music seemed totally out of touch with reality.

Hip-swivelling hits

Alongside comedy, though, there was a whole series of new dance crazes. The Twist, with Chubby Checker leading the hip-swivelling, was the most important, but there were many spin-offs, all performed to much the same basic beat. The Twist theme song was written by Hank Ballard, who fronted the Midnighters and recorded his own million-selling version which charted in 1960. Nevertheless, it was Chubby Checker (real name Ernest Evans) who led the whole worldwide dance craze which sold millions of records and even spawned a film. Once onto a good thing, there was no holding Chubby. He scored with 'Pony Time' and 'Let's Twist Again', following these with a new dance craze, 'The Fly'.

As ever, the record industry sensed a lucrative new trend, moved in on it from all directions and in the end killed it stone dead. Without this bandwagon-jumping instinct, it's possible that dance crazes could have emerged and vanished quietly and regularly, for years, as they had from the jazz-based Charleston onwards. There had been jive, jitterbugging, the Creep, then the Cha-Cha, and the Locomotion, which helped make Little Eva's record of the same name a massive international hit in 1962.

But if the fads and novelties were short-lived, then the people who suffered most were the artists caught up in a here today, gone tomorrow business. Some had the instinct and talent to produce further hit records, but others had to go through what was left of their careers with the dreaded 'one-hit wonder' tag.

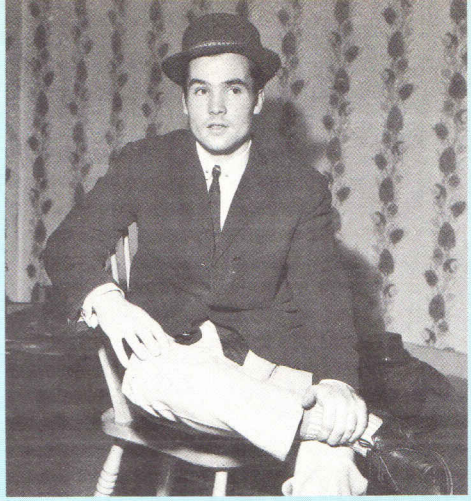
Stars for a day

The history of rock is littered with performers who make the charts, maybe with their very first record, and sometimes even make Number 1 in the ratings, never again to appear. Typical was the case of Ricky Valance who made Number 1 in the UK and several other countries in 1960 with 'Tell Laura I Love Her', a doomy epic of teenage death and despair. He had 16 weeks of glory, touring and television exposure and never again made the charts. Two years previously, the Kalin Twins, Hal and Herbie, had made Number 1 in the UK with 'When', selling a million copies. Somewhat surprisingly, however, they never again earned a UK chart listing. Sometimes it was simply a case of the song being the seller, so that the artist was purely a means of selling it. Yet the record industry often failed to turn a short-term hit into a long-term business project.

Elias and his Zig-Zag Jive Flutes must have felt sure that they had launched a new musical style when 'Tom Hark' reached Number 2 in the UK charts in 1958, putting South African instrumentalists on the map, but nothing happened thereafter. Los Indios Tabajaros scored on both sides of the Atlantic with 'Maria Elena' in 1963, and were publicised as a guitar-based group discovered in some remote Brazilian jungle. Despite their success, however, there was no follow-up hit.

From the birth of rock'n'roll through to the appearance of the Beatles, when the pop pattern changed all over again, there was a stream of fads, novelties and one-hit wonders. The record industry was, in the main, bewildered, baffled and only too happy to latch on to anything offered in the hope that sales would stick, whether the new idea was a genuine musical style, a singing nun or a pack of barking dogs.

PETER JONES



Ricky Valance (above) reflects uneasily upon the sudden success of 1960's 'Tell Laura I Love Her'. It was his only hit. Chubby Checker (below) balances rather more confidently demonstrating the Twist, while Atlantic's Jerry Wexler learns how to dance the Mashed Potato with Ronnie Bennett of the Ronettes (bottom left).

ATLANTIC CROSSOVER

How a small company hit the big time

OF ALL THE GREAT independent record labels battling for survival during the Fifties, Atlantic was the most impressive. Savoy, Modern, Imperial, Aladdin and Specialty had formidable rosters of R&B talent and Chess ruled the blues, while King made convincing forays with hillbilly and some black music – but Atlantic eventually learned to tap both specialised and popular markets with a professionalism more often encountered among the majors. Guided by the enthusiasm and nerve of Ahmet Ertegun, Atlantic nurtured the best in contemporary black music and recorded it in conformity with the highest technical standards. Perhaps only Sam Phillips' Sun label reaped similar respect because, like Ertegun, Phillips had an uncluttered vision of where he was going.

Ahmet Ertegun was the son of a former Turkish ambassador to Washington and had the money and time to indulge his passion for collecting jazz and R&B 78s. This, combined with an appetite for graceful living and an esoteric interest in the higher reaches of philosophy, marked Ahmet as a dilettante ostensibly unsuited to the mainstream of American commerce. But his lifestyle demanded money and, shortly after the Second World War, he moved into the record business with only a

The range of Atlantic's artists: from the Fifties R&B of the Clovers (left) to the Seventies power of Led Zeppelin (below).

Jerry Wexler in the studio with singer Ruth Brown in the early Fifties.

Ruth Brown

Born Ruth Weston on 30 January 1928 in Portsmouth, Virginia, Ruth Brown was raised in a religious family. She broke loose from the gospel tradition to sing popular songs and met her first husband, James Earle Brown, in Norfolk, Virginia. They toured briefly together before Ruth moved on for a brief but eventful stay with Lucky Millinder's band. She was spotted by a Washington DJ, Willis Conover, who told Herb Abramson in New York.

After a bad car crash had temporarily halted her progress, Ruth finally made it to the Atlantic studios and cut a demo, 'Rain Is A Bringdown', on 6 April 1949. Her backing musicians were Texas Johnny Brown on guitar and veteran pianist Amos Milburn. The result sounded close to the style of Billie Holiday. In May she returned to record 'So Long'/'It's Raining', and this debut single provided Atlantic with a much-needed hit.

Early on Ruth became preoccupied with recording respectable standards, but 'Teardrops From My Eyes' (1950), penned by Rudolph Toombs, was the first of her sides to justify her nickname of 'Miss Rhythm'. It sold a million and reached Number 1 in the R&B charts, as did her versions of such Toombs compositions as the highly-suggestive '5-10-15 Hours' (1952) and 'Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean' (1953). These songs featured the licentious squeal that was to be her trademark. Other songs in this vein were 'Mend Your Ways', 'I Would If I Could', 'Ever Since My Baby's Been Gone' (1953) and 'I Want To Do More' (1955).

As the Fifties waned, however, so did the hits. The material became thinner, although Leiber and Stoller's 'Lucky Lips' (1957) gained Ruth Brown brief international attention. She was a great performer, a leading lady at Atlantic, and continued making fine sides like 'Don't Deceive Me' (1959) right up to her departure from the label in 1960. But ultimately, despite 18 R&B hits, Ruth Brown's jazz-inflected voice proved unable to touch the mass white audience that Atlantic sought.

10,000-dollar loan from his dentist to sustain him. Fortunately, he was able to lean on the experience of Herb Abramson, a jazz and blues buff from Brooklyn who for some years had partnered Ahmet's elder brother Nesuhi in promoting jazz concerts on the Washington circuit.

Finesse and education

Atlantic Records was officially launched in 1947 with Abramson as president and Ahmet Ertegun as vice-president. Both were men of some finesse and education, qualities notably absent among the bosses of the independents. Abramson knew something about running a small recording business because he had worked for Al Green's National label and had enjoyed a major coup when he signed the Ravens to a roster which boasted Joe Turner, Pete Johnson and Billy Eckstine. Abramson had also established the Jubilee (gospel) and Quality (jazz) labels in-between leaving National and setting up Atlantic.

The early recordings on Atlantic largely reflected the owners' taste for jazz – a taste easily indulged on the New York scene but hardly the most popular black music at that time. If Ertegun and Abramson were to find the wider black audience, then it was essential to secure a singer who could provide an R&B hit. Ruth Brown, a new young singer from Portsmouth, Virginia, seemed a likely candidate but was involved in an automobile accident and was temporarily out of the running. The way was open for Stick McGhee, brother of bluesman Brownie, who re-recorded his Harlem label opus 'Drinking Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee' and put Atlantic into the Number 3 spot on *Billboard*'s Race chart during April 1949. Ruth Brown's second Atlantic session in May supplied her debut single, 'So Long'/'It's Raining'; this peaked at Number 6 in September. Between them, these sides kept the fledgling label afloat.

The foundations of later success were laid during field trips into the South: such exploration was especially necessary for Atlantic in order to add some blues to a jazz-dominated catalogue. A 1949 excursion to New Orleans, for example, turned up Professor Longhair (Roy Byrd) and a number of sides, including his inimitable 'Mardi Gras in New Orleans', were issued the following year, although without immediate commercial success. The impact of this raw Southern R&B was not lost, however, on the more refined palates of Ertegun and Abramson. They determined to rework it if they could, to tailor it to the greater sophistication of the Northeast while retaining the essential drive and spontaneity which made it so popular.

To achieve this amalgam of sophistication and drive, the two entrepreneurs employed the talents of writer and arranger Jesse Stone, alias Charles Calhoun, a musician who had first impressed Abramson during his time at National. To attract new talent, Stone set up in Cosimo Matassa's studio in New Orleans with a six-piece band. An advertisement posted

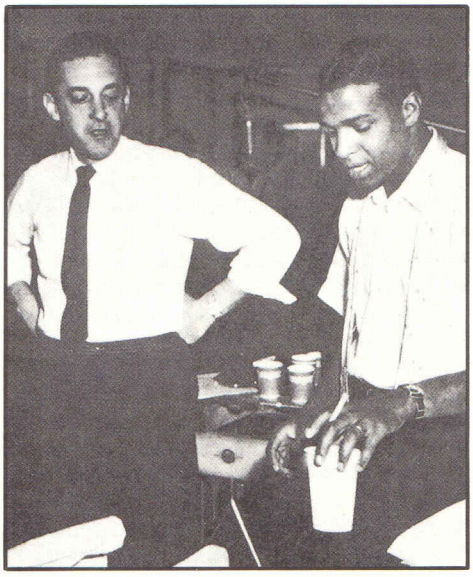
outside attracted a queue of would-be singer/songwriters, who were auditioned and recorded in little more than half an hour apiece.

Secrets of success

Jesse Stone wrote many of the early Atlantic hits – Frank Culley's instrumental 'Cole Slaw' (1949) for example – long before writing and arranging Joe Turner's 'Shake Rattle And Roll' (1954), with its gloriously carnal lyrics, the equally suggestive 'Money Honey' (1954) by Clyde McPhatter and 'Down In The Alley' (1957) for the Clovers. Stone was a key figure in the development of rock'n'roll and Abramson and Ertegun depended on his shaping hand. He supervised sessions with the Clovers and the Cardinals, often coming up with sides tougher than usual for vocal groups cut in the Northeast, and wrote arrangements for Ruth Brown. Her massive Number 1 R&B hit in 1950, 'Teardrops From My Eyes', was the New York equivalent of Southern raunch, while the following year's 'Shine On' managed to capture the latin pulse of New Orleans.

The secret of Atlantic's success lay in the careful cultivation of house arrangers-cum-musicians – like Stone himself, Rudolph Toombs, Ernie Hayes, Howard Biggs and Budd Johnson – alongside such talented session men as Lloyd Trotman (bass), Harry Van Walls (piano), Mickey Baker (guitar), Sam 'The Man' Taylor and Ruth Brown's second husband, Willis Jackson (tenor sax). Lending the proceedings an unprecedented clarity was engineer Tom Dowd, while Ertegun maintained a watchful eye. Ertegun insisted on producing such artists as Clyde McPhatter and veteran blues-shouter Joe Turner. Indeed, he so admired Turner that he took great pains to move him around the country in search of new and more commercial sounds. With Ertegun and Stone at the mixing desk, Turner tore up New Orleans R&B with 'Crawdad Hole' and 'Honey Hush' in 1953 and tried Southside Chicago blues in 'TV Mama' later the same year (the slide guitar of Elmore James distinguished that session). Among the string of excellent New York recordings that Joe embarked upon was 'Chains Of Love' (1951), a best-selling ballad written by Ertegun under the pseudonym 'Nugetre'.

Initially Atlantic lacked artists who were truly self-sufficient in the manner of Imperial's Fats Domino, who wrote, played, sang and co-produced with associate Dave Bartholomew. Atlantic had to wait until 1953 when they secured Ray Charles' contract from Swingtime for 2500 dollars before they had a comparable talent. Charles was the genuine article, a creative genius who wrote and arranged prodigiously and evinced a healthy contempt for the manipulative demands of



Ahmet Ertegun, Wexler and Joe Turner inspect copies of 'Corrine Corrina'.

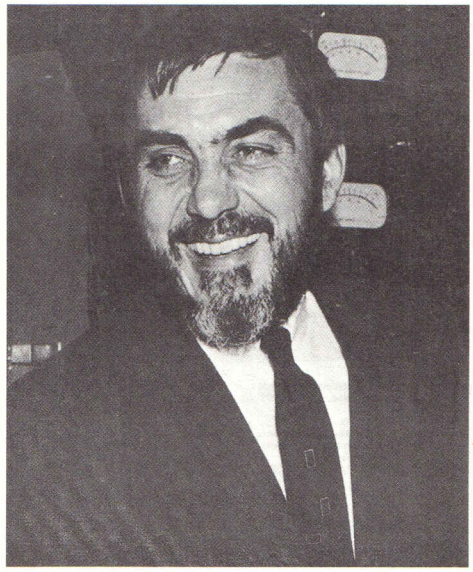
Joe Turner

Along with Louis Jordan, Wynonie Harris, Roy Brown, Johnny Otis and Fats Domino, Joe Turner was one of the founding fathers of rock'n'roll. Born on 18 May 1911 in Kansas City, Missouri, he was raised on the blues of Ethel Waters, Bessie Smith, Leroy Carr and Lonnie Johnson. He began singing with boogie pianist Pete Johnson in the late Twenties, his strident tones cutting through the noise of nightclub patrons without recourse to a microphone. Turner ventured to New York in December 1938 and cut 'Goin' Away Blues'/'Roll 'Em Pete' for the Vocalion label.

He carried his muscular, rampaging style unchanged to Okeh, Decca and National. On the National label, supported by such lumini as Albert Ammons (piano), Don Byas, Wild Bill Moore (tenor sax), Ike Perkins, Leonard Ware and Teddy Bunn (guitar) he cut some of his most powerful sides. 'My Gal's A Jockey' (1946) and 'Hollywood Bed' (1947) were typical.

Ahmet Ertegun retrieved Turner from an unhappy stay with the Count Basie band and signed him to Atlantic in 1951. The first session that year resulted in a million-selling ballad, 'Chains Of Love', written by Ertegun with pianist Harry Van Walls. 'Honey Hush', recorded in New Orleans in 1953, was the shape of things to come. A red-hot rocker, it paved the way for the immortal Jesse Stone composition 'Shake Rattle And Roll' (1954) – covered with almost indecent haste by Bill Haley – and storming performances like 'Flip Flop and Fly', 'Boogie Woogie Country Girl' (1955), 'Corrine Corrina' (1956) and 'Teenage Letter' (1957), all recorded in New York.

Joe Turner secured 10 chart entries on Atlantic between 1951 and 1956 and cut his last sides for them in 1961. His influence on the first generation of classic rock'n'rollers like Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis is incalculable.

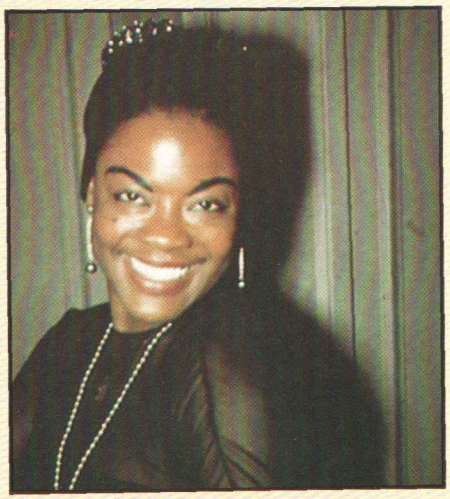


Ivory Joe Hunter with a fan (opposite above) and signing with Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun (left). Above left: Herb Abramson and Clyde McPhatter seen during the cutting of 'Seven Days'. Right: Atlantic's engineer, Tom Dowd.

LaVern Baker

LaVern Baker was born on 11 November 1929 in Chicago, and was raised as a Baptist. In 1946 she so impressed George and Mabel Woods that they signed her to appear at the local Club DeLisa where they dubbed her 'Little Miss Sharecropper'. Soon she graduated to the Flame Bar, Detroit, where owner Al Green became her manager. La Vern subsequently toured with the Todd Rhodes band and cut some sides for King Records, including 'Must I Cry Again', 'Pig Latin Blues' and 'Trying'.

Glamorous, talented and versatile – LaVern Baker, signed by Atlantic in 1952.



In 1953 she joined Atlantic where some 114 recordings were issued over the next decade before she moved to Brunswick. All sessions but one were held in New York and used top talent like Sam 'The Man' Taylor and King Curtis (tenor sax), Emmett Berry, Buck Clayton and Joe Newman (trumpet), Herbie Mann (flute), Mickey Baker (guitar), Hank Jones and Mike Stoller (piano), and Connie Kay, Sticks Evans and Panama Francis (drums). Arrangers included Jesse Stone, Howard Biggs and Quincy Jones.

An undeniably stunning woman, her figure set off by the sheath dresses she habitually wore, LaVern toured widely and appeared in two films during 1957 – *Mr Rock And Roll* and *Rock Rock Rock* – which carried her warm, playful presence to a wider audience. Her talent could take in supper-club songs, latin, gospel, blues and standards with equal ease. LaVern Baker's million-selling records were 'Tweedlee Dee' (1954), 'Jim Dandy' (1955) and the ballad 'I Cried A Tear' (1959). Her best performances included 'Soul On Fire' (1953), 'You Better Stop' (1955), 'Substitute' (1957), 'Shake A Hand' (1959), 'Bumble Bee' (1960) and 'CC Rider' (1962) – material which covered a wide musical spectrum. LaVern Baker dominated the Fifties just as surely as Aretha Franklin ruled the Sixties for the same company.

A&R men. Indeed, the very quality Atlantic so desired was, at first, a drawback because Charles still insisted on playing in his West Coast blues and jazz style; R&B numbers like 'Mess Around' and 'Heartbreaker' (1953), written by Ertegun himself, helped break the ice.

Charles wasted little time responding, and the same year started a series of hit compositions of his own. He consolidated his position as one of the leading black solo performers during his stay at Atlantic, notching up 18 R&B hits in all.

Ivory Joe Hunter combined gospel piano, country songs and blues feeling. Atlantic signed him in 1954 after a recording career dating back to 1933, during which he'd scored numerous R&B hits. He rewarded them with 'It May Sound Silly', a pop hit in 1955; 'Since I Met You Baby', a Number 12 million-seller in 1956 and 'Empty Arms', which made the R&B Top Ten in 1957.

Sweetening the blues

Other artists, too, were making successful careers with the label. Ruth Brown also had 18 hits, while close behind was 'the Countess', glamorous LaVern Baker, with 15 hits. Baker represented the wider aspirations of the company in that she was packaged as something more than an R&B artist. Potential film star and consummate cabaret performer, she reached the white audience as well with a calculated balance of polished R&B numbers, sentimental ballads, novelty items and latin rhythms. LaVern's recordings represented part of the policy of giving the mass white audience something they could accommodate: Jerry Wexler called this tactic 'sweetening.'

Wexler was a jazz afficionado with a background in publishing who joined Atlantic in 1953 after Abramson had been notified that he was required to spend two years in Germany in the US Armed Forces. Wexler had been engaged for his abilities as a promotions man, making contact with the most influential disc jockeys. By the time Abramson returned from his tour of duty, Wexler had also established himself at the mixing desk. Abramson was given the newly-formed Atco label, a subsidiary of Atlantic, to control but could not sustain the initial success obtained with the Coasters and Bobby Darin and was eventually bought out by Wexler, Ahmet Ertegun and his brother Nesuhi; it was Nesuhi who now took over Atlantic's jazz side.

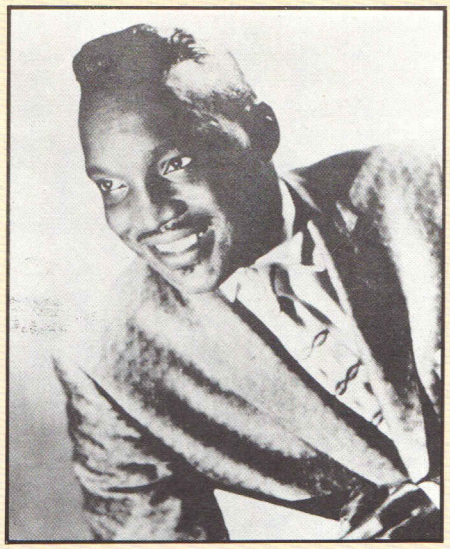
Wexler was keenly concerned to find the broader rock market; during 1954, for example, he had tried unsuccessfully to sign Presley for 25,000 dollars simply on the strength of 'That's All Right'. As the Fifties progressed, Atlantic approached the mass market from a variety of angles. Firstly, all Atlantic recordings, under Tom Dowd's direction, were technically excellent – Chuck Willis was probably the first R&B artist to be recorded in stereo. Willis, Baker and, latterly, Ruth Brown were given R&B arrangements sweetened with vocal choruses and strings to appeal

Above: Bobby Darin (second right) returns to Atlantic from Capitol in 1966 and poses with Wexler, Nesuhi and Ahmet Ertegun. Below right: The Drifters have remained front-line artists for three decades.

to a wider audience. And Atlantic's acquisition (through Atco) of the services of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller in the mid Fifties was indicative of the company's determination to pursue new popular styles and find new songwriters.

Based in Los Angeles, Leiber and Stoller immediately discovered that national distribution would further their talents when a re-release of the Robins' 'Smokey Joe's Cafe' sold a quarter of a million copies. The duo took over most of the production chores with the established roster at Atlantic and developed newer acts, notably the Coasters – as the Robins were now known – and the Drifters. The Drifters carried Atlantic into the Sixties, bridging the gap between classic R&B and the label's later soul artists with 24 hits. Leiber and Stoller developed latin rhythms with many of these artists and lightened the whole Atlantic sound.

By the late Fifties, the company was financially secure. Any doubts about its new status had been settled with the signing of Bobby Darin, its first major white singer. It was significant that Darin moved swiftly from relatively tough items like 'Early In The Morning', 'Splish Splash' and 'Queen Of The Hop' (all 1958) to the supper-club sophistication of 'Mack The Knife' (1959). The company had found its Frank Sinatra in yet another Italian-American – this one with teen-appeal – and the way was open for Atlantic to join the majors. Ahead lay a deal with Jim Stewart's Stax label, the discovery and successful commercial exploitation of soul music, expansion into the progressive rock of the Sixties and overdue recognition for a jazz catalogue that had quietly acquired artists of the stature of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. CLIVE ANDERSON



Chuck Willis, a forerunner of soul.

Chuck Willis

Harold 'Chuck' Willis was born on 31 January 1928 in Atlanta, Georgia. He was discovered by local DJ Zenas Sears during the late Forties and was slotted into shows on the Atlanta circuit. Eventually Sears took Willis to Okeh, Columbia's R&B label, although the first single, 'It Ain't Right To Treat Me Wrong'/'Can't You See', surfaced on the parent label in January 1951. The next 17 singles, jump-blues like 'I Rule My House' (1951) and doom-laden ballads such as 'Two Spoons Of Tears' (1956), all came out on Okeh. Five were R&B hits, namely 'My Story' (1952), 'Going To The River', 'Don't Deceive Me' (1953), 'You're Still My Baby' and 'I Feel So Bad' (1954). (The last-named was copied closely by Elvis Presley in 1961 and went gold for him.) Willis was not only an assured performer, but wrote most of his Okeh material.

It was at Atlantic in the latter half of the decade, however, that he enjoyed his greatest commercial success under the aegis of producer Jerry Wexler, starting with 'It's Too Late' from an April 1956 session. Some 25 sides were released from six New York sessions, including nine hit singles and one million-seller in 'What Am I Living For'/'Hang Up My Rock And Roll Shoes' (1958). Ironically, however, Willis only wrote the B-side of the latter, and his major hits, 'CC Rider' (1957) and 'Betty And Dupree' (1958), were both covers of folk-blues standards.

Willis remains the most underrated of the Fifties R&B giants and a progenitor of soul balladry. He had a limited range, but possessed a voice of inescapable charm and delicacy. Strangely enough, as his blues style was diluted to meet the wider rock'n'roll market, his work became more sad and haunting. The fragile melancholy of his voice hung, lilting, among strings or sighing choruses, and even when he rocked the tone was wry. His finest work for Atlantic included 'Ease The Pain' (1956), 'Stop And Think' (1957) and 'Keep A Driving' (1958). Tragically he had a drinking problem and died of a stomach complaint on 10 April 1958.

CUTTING THE GROOVES

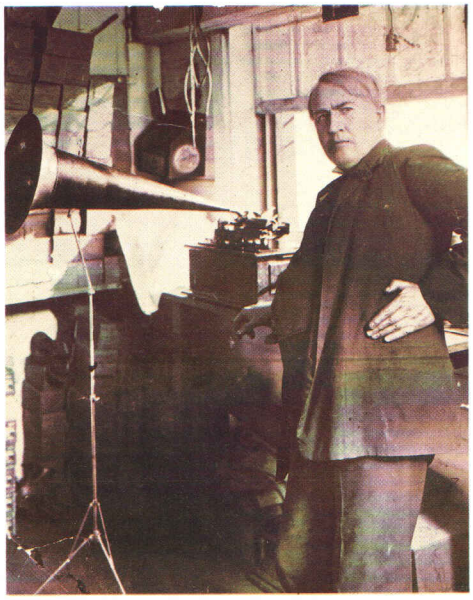
Record production from mixing desk to market place

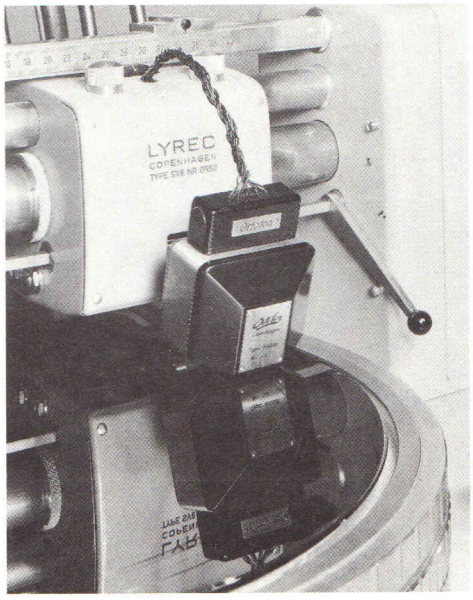
THE MOST FAMOUS recording studio in the history of rock music had a business card that summed up the technical complications of the day. 'Memphis Recording Service', it read. 'Disc – Tape – Wire, Standard and Microgroove, 33⅓–45–78 rpm.' When Sam Phillips opened the doors of his studio at 706 Union Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, in January 1950, the recording industry was passing through important technological changes, but by the end of the decade stability had been achieved and a system of recording and disc manufacture had been established that has lasted, with comparatively minor changes, to the present day.

The work of technicians in developing and then perfecting the vinyl microgroove disc was of crucial importance in the growth of the recording industry. The shellac 78 it replaced was fragile and unsuited to production in huge quantities in a single run, and, more importantly, it had a narrow frequency range that produced discernible and often-intrusive background noise. Both these drawbacks would have hampered rock's development as a musical form.

Earlier forms of music had grown up either before – or independently of – the development of sound reproduction, but the progress of rock, from the primal rockabilly of Elvis to the complexities of Phil Spector's 'little symphonies for the kids', was inextricably linked to records. The sound of rock is more a product of the studio than of the club or the concert hall. Unlike jazz or classical music, rock was not an established musical form forced through an imperfect technological medium. It was new and growing, and as it developed so did the technology. From the wire recorder to the 24-track studio, every important technical development influenced the music and musicians.

But let us step back. The gramophone record, and its associated recording and playback equipment, is an example of a piece of technology that has not fundamentally changed since the day of its invention. The principle employed by Thomas Edison in recording 'Mary Had A Little Lamb' on his original wax cylinder is the same used in the very latest cutting lathe. The vibrations in air we know as sound are converted to physical form by being engraved onto a moving surface. On replay, the physical undulations are traced and converted back into vibrations in the air. Particular changes in the recording process have been numerous, but at its heart there has been a reassuring continuity from Edison to the Eighties.





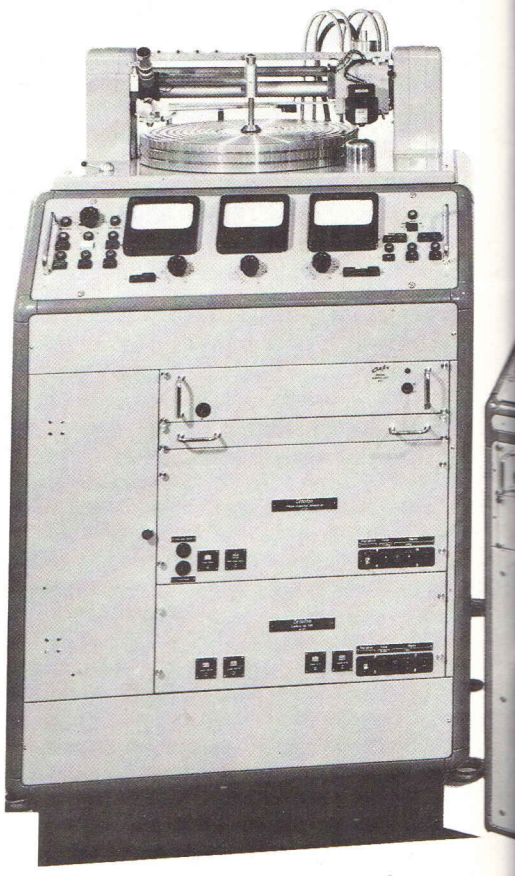
Above left: Thomas Edison, pioneer of the phonograph. Above: The cutting head transcribes the sound onto a lacquer disc. Opposite: Cutting lathes (right) in Capitol Tower, Hollywood.

78s and sapphire needles

The most fundamental change was the adoption of electrical recordings and replay in the Twenties, whereby sound was converted into an electrical signal before being engraved as mechanical vibrations on a rotating disc; the same process occurred in reverse on replay. The techniques and materials developed in that period remained the world standard long past the time they had been superseded in laboratory experiment and endured right up to the end of the Forties.

The procedure was for the music to be picked up on microphones and passed direct to the cutting lathe, where the sound was etched into a wax recording blank. These sides were made from molten wax that had been cast into aluminium moulds and then rough-turned on conventional lathes before being polished to a mirror surface, ready for cutting. Before the cut started, the blanks would be heated to make them soft. The cutting lathe incorporated a rotating turntable and the cutting stylus moved across it from the edge to the centre, cutting a spiral groove. The stylus itself was of sapphire; it was sharp-edged and highly polished to ensure that the tiny undulations containing the higher frequencies were properly cut.

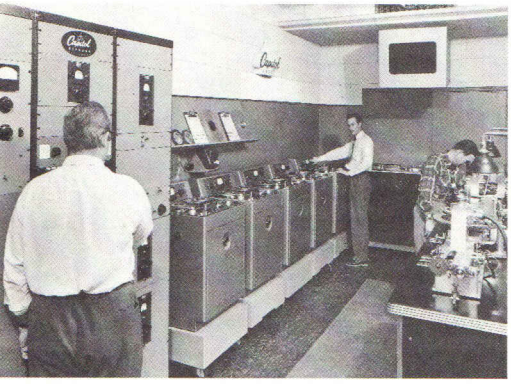
The cut wax blank was very delicate; after cooling, a metal copy was made from it (using a process which has hardly changed to the present day) and it was this metal copy that was used to stamp out the actual record. The discs were made of shellac, a type of natural plastic, eked out with liberal amounts of filler such as clay. Shellac discs were very abrasive, and this had important consequences. In the first place, manufacturing them was not easy and the copper stampers used to press them were subjected to heavy wear. The



From the tape machine (right), the sound passes through various controls to the cutting head at left. A monitor amplifier enables the sound to be checked right up to the cutting itself.

presses had to be watched by experienced operators and the pressing temperature and time adjusted frequently. Secondly, the composition of the discs made it necessary to use steel or fibre needles, designed for easy replacement, on the replay equipment. The well-equipped gramophone of the inter-war years contained a little veneered compartment to hold a box of needles.

One big drawback of the wax disc was that it had to be processed before it could be replayed. The growth of American radio



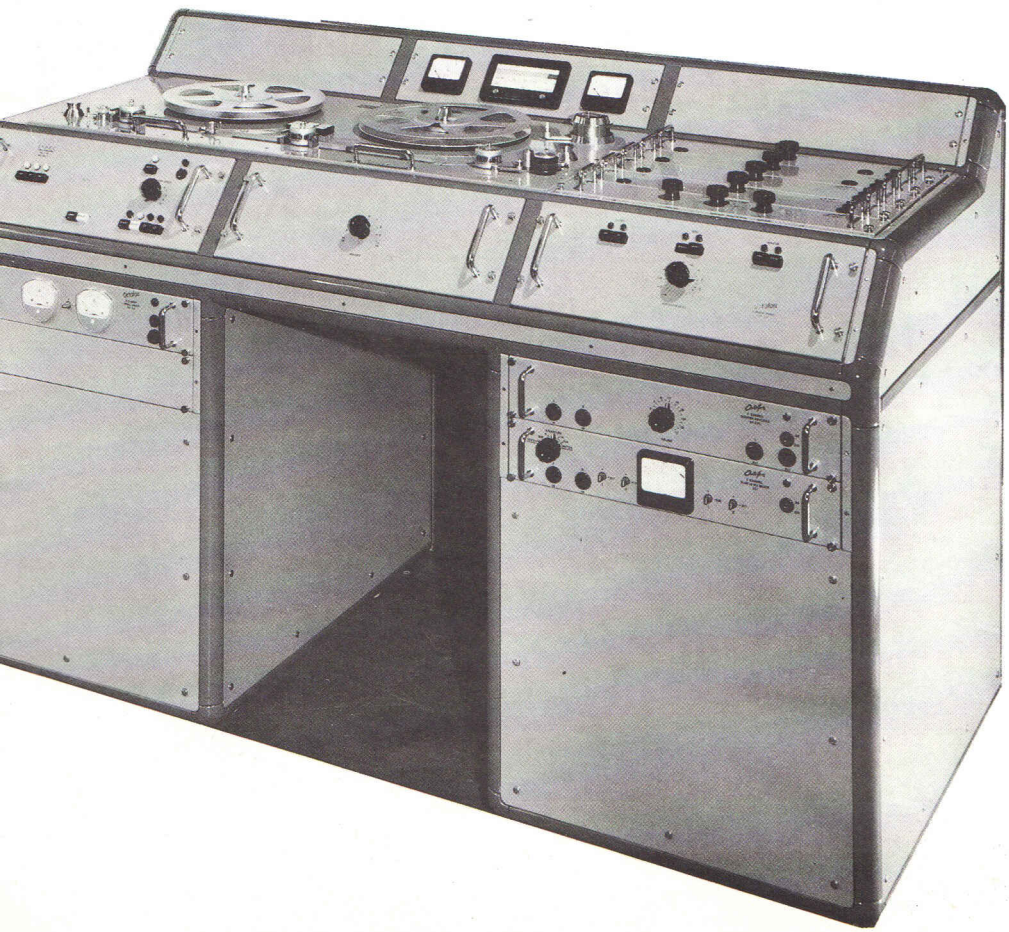
brought a dramatic increase in the demand for music, and the broadcasters wanted a recording medium that was both portable and capable of immediate replay. The lacquer-coated aluminium disc provided the answer. It was developed at the end of the Thirties specifically for instantaneous replay, but it later came to be employed in all record manufacture.

The recording blank invented then, and still standard in the Eighties, was an aluminium disc coated on both sides with a thin layer of plasticised cellulose lacquer. It was discovered early on that if the lacquer blank was cut with the sharp polished cutter used on wax blanks, then the resulting groove was jagged and the level of background noise high. A blunt sapphire gave better results. As it dragged its way through the lacquer the walls of the groove were smoother and the background noise on replaying much quieter. There was a drawback, however; a blunt cutting stylus could never reproduce high frequencies.

As a result of this deficiency, the new lacquered disc was used for instantaneous recording where top quality was not essential and the old wax blank continued to be used for volume runs. Shortly after the Second World War, however, came the idea of heating the sapphire cutting stylus by passing a current through a coil wound around it. Now a sharp, polished stylus could be used in order to produce discs that were able to reproduce high frequencies and had a low level of background noise. Consequently, the wax blank very quickly became obsolete.

The other main change to occur before the rock era was the arrival of the vinyl microgroove record to replace the shellac 78. Experiments with new materials had been going on since the Thirties, as had attempts to increase the playing time of records.

Columbia Records was first on the US market with its 33⅓ rpm, 12-inch record in 1948. RCA had put its money on a 45 rpm, 7-inch system, which went on sale the following year. RCA sought to counter the play-length limitation of the 45 by introducing simultaneously the autochanger, a device for playing several discs in succession. Thus the great divide between the album and the single came about as the result of a marketing battle between two recording giants. Both systems were recognised when international recording standards were laid down in 1955.



The production process

The major change in the studio occurred when magnetic tape was used to record the session (see page 198); the cut onto the lacquered disc was then made from the tape recording rather than direct from the session. But from the cutting stage onwards, the process of record manufacture has changed little since the mid Fifties. A higher level of automation is employed, of course, and many singles are made by injection moulding rather than the traditional pressing process, but otherwise the whole operation is very similar.

A very real problem has always been to produce from the unique and delicate cut lacquer an indefinite number of identical copies capable of being played an indefinite number of times. Although the lacquer recording blank, as originally introduced, had been intended for instantaneous record and replay, there were people who wanted to keep recordings made on the lacquers and mass-produce them later. An independent record-pressing industry grew up in America to service just this demand, the techniques employed being derived directly from the system used in making records from wax blanks.

The basis of the process is electroforming, a variation on electroplating, whereby an object is coated in metal by being immersed in a solution of a metal salt while an electric current is passed through both the object and the solution. As the current passes, the metal is deposited on the object. In record manufacture, the metal stampers used to press the vinyl are made by several stages of electroforming, starting with the original cut lacquer.

In order that the lacquer can be used in the electroforming process it has first to be made into an electrical conductor. This is done by 'silvering' it. First the lacquer is chemically cleaned and then two silver solutions are poured or sprayed onto it. The reaction that follows causes a microscopically thin layer of silver to be deposited on the cut surface of the lacquer. This electrically conducting layer becomes the cathode (negative electrode) in the plating process.

The plating solution is nickel sulphate (or some derivative) dissolved in water. When a current is passed through the solution, the nickel ions move to the negative electrode and stick to it. The sulphate ions move to the positive electrode, and if this is made of nickel it dissolves, thus replenishing the solution. The initial plating of a silvered lacquer is done at a

Record production from studio to sleeve

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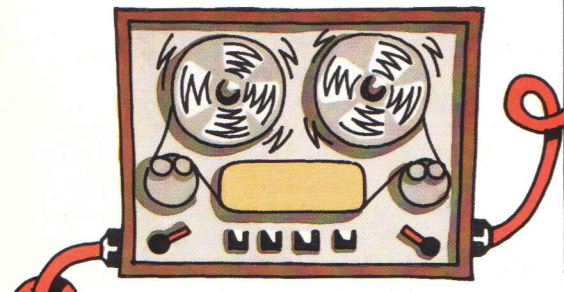
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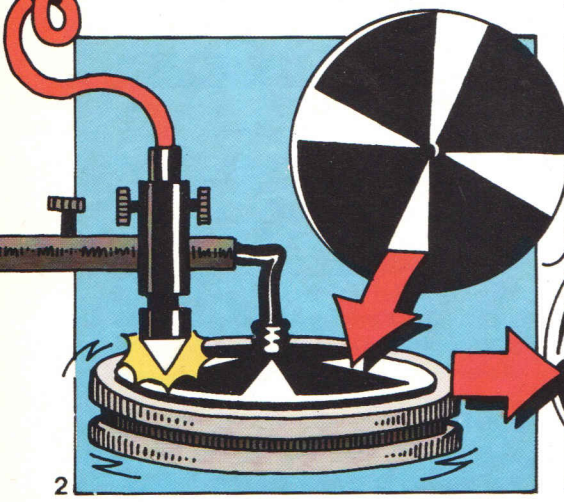
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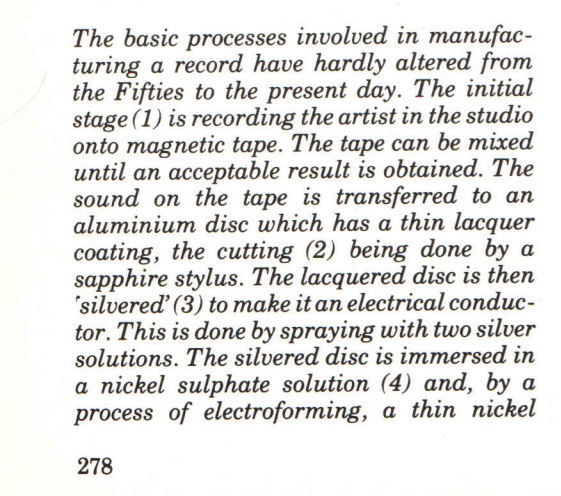
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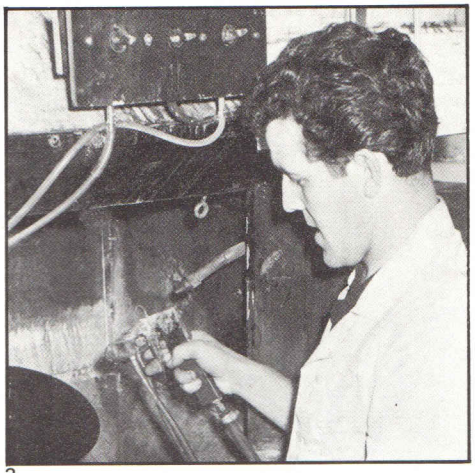
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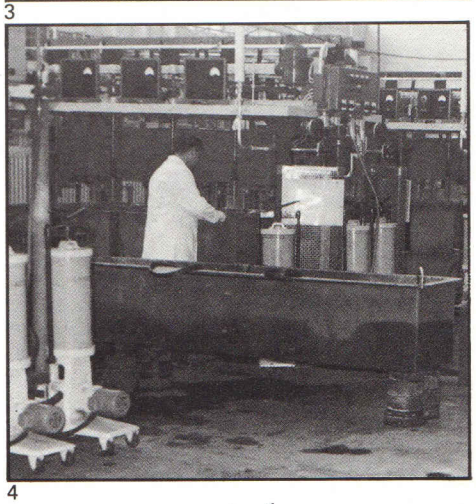
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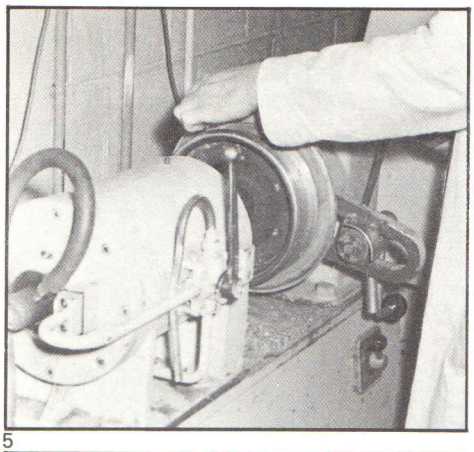
The basic processes involved in manufacturing a record have hardly altered from the Fifties to the present day. The initial stage (1) is recording the artist in the studio onto magnetic tape. The tape can be mixed until an acceptable result is obtained. The sound on the tape is transferred to an aluminium disc which has a thin lacquer coating, the cutting (2) being done by a sapphire stylus. The lacquered disc is then 'silvered' (3) to make it an electrical conductor. This is done by spraying with two silver solutions. The silvered disc is immersed in a nickel sulphate solution (4) and, by a process of electroforming, a thin nickel



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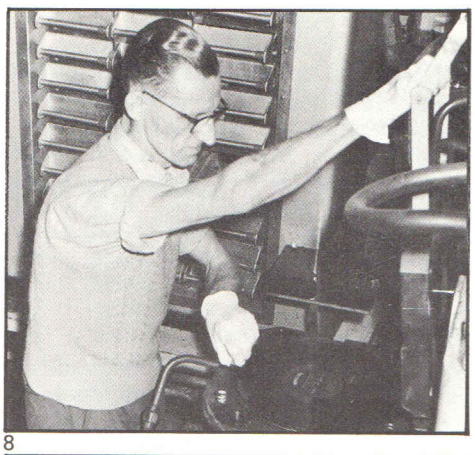

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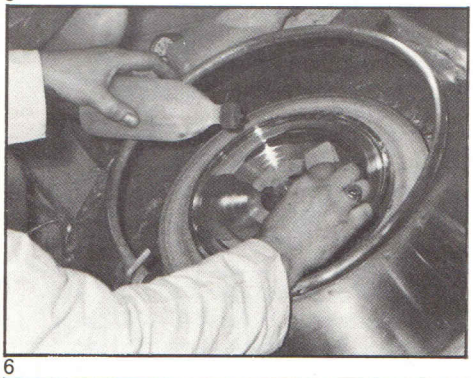

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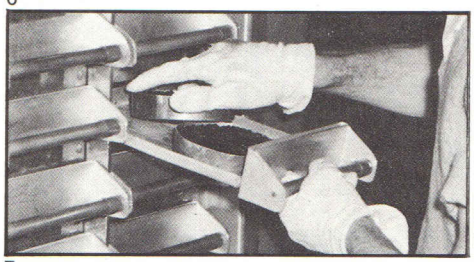

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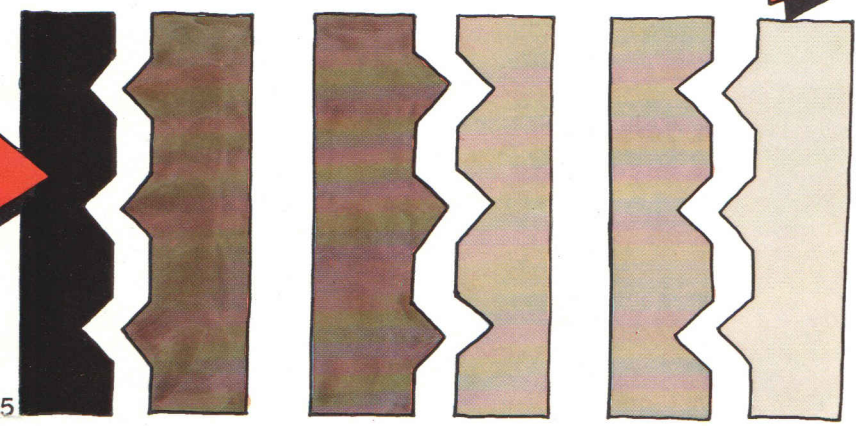

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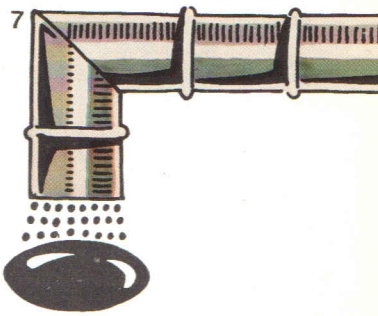

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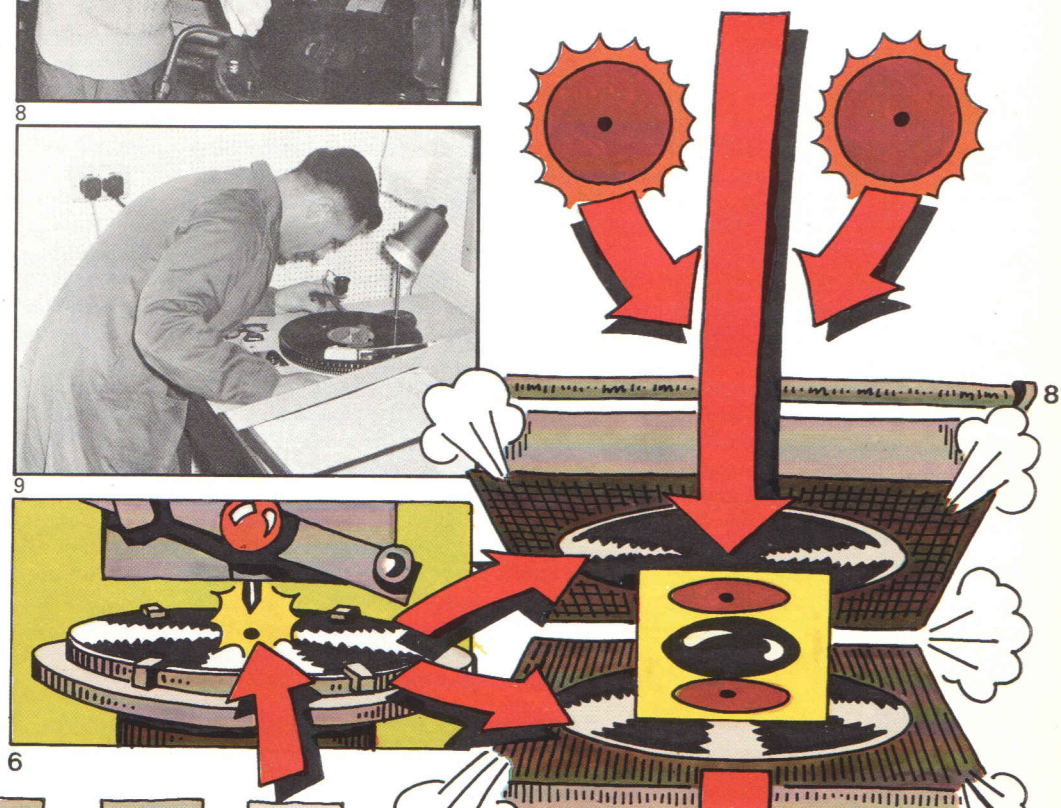

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layer is added over the silver. A second stage of electroforming, in a large tank for about 50 minutes, provides a thicker layer of nickel which is pulled away from the original to form the master (5). The master is a negative copy; in its turn it is subjected to an electroforming process to provide the mother, or positive copy, which is used for checks and quality control later. (Photograph 5 shows the separation lathe used after electroforming to peel the positive from the negative.)

The stamper is the final negative copy obtained by electroforming from the mother. It has a centre hole punched (diagram 6) and is placed in the record press. (Photograph 6 is of a stamper being cleaned.) Each stamper has a life of about 4000 pressings.

The vinyl granules which are to be formed into the records themselves are shaped into pucks and warmed in an oven to make them malleable (7). They are then introduced into the press, together with the moisture-free labels. It takes only two seconds to press a single 12-inch record (8). The final stage (9) is for the records to be tested, checked and bagged up in their sleeves. Then the sound can come out again, just as in the studio ...

low temperature and at a low current, to ensure a smooth initial coating. Then the disc is transferred to a tank through which a current is passed for 50 minutes. All the while the disc is rotated and the temperature of the solution is held at about 50 degrees centigrade.

The metal part produced by the first stage of electroforming is called the master. It is peeled away from the lacquer upon which it was formed, and is known as a negative – that is, the groove is raised rather than sunken. The next stage is to make what is known as the positive or mother, which is produced by electroforming the master. This positive copy of the original lacquer can be played for the purposes of quality control. The final stage in the metalworking process comes when the stamper is made by electroforming the mother. Once again, this is a negative copy of the original cut lacquer.

A centre hole is punched in the stamper, and the edges of the stamper are 'coined' so that it will press the correct contours of the disc, with a rounded edge and a raised centre. The stampers for both sides of a record are clamped into the record press itself, where they meet a 'puck' of warm vinyl and a label for each side of the disc. The labels must be made of paper capable of withstanding the very high temperatures inside the press. It is essential, too, that they are free of all moisture, otherwise they would blister as heat is applied. Some plants use ovens to ensure all the labels are absolutely dry.

The final pressing sequence is very quick. For about 14 seconds the press is kept open while the labels are loaded and the vinyl is warmed. To press a single disc takes only two seconds, during which time steam heat is applied to the stampers to bring the temperature up to about 160 degrees centigrade. The disc is then cooled by water for approximately 12 seconds before being emptied from the press and placed on a rack to cool before being put in its sleeve.

Production costs

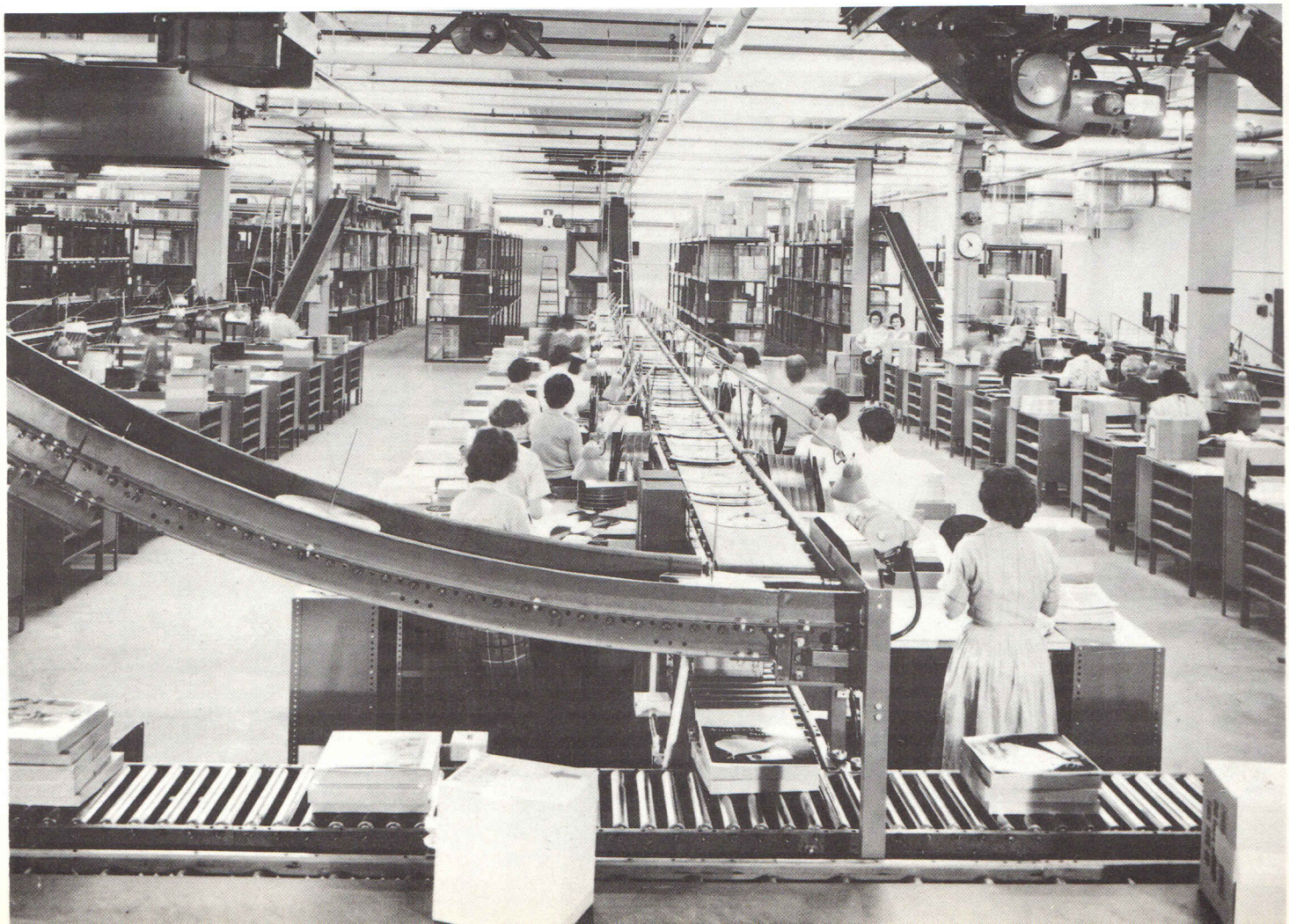
All these processes were still being refined in the Fifties; recording techniques were still simple and so the record-making process was inexpensive. At the beginning of the decade overdubbing was unknown and a well-rehearsed band could put down four sides in a standard three-hour session. In his book on Atlantic Records, *Making Tracks*, Charlie Gillett gave the following information on record production costs as stated in evidence to a 1959 congressional committee investigating payola. Pressing 1000 singles was said to cost 140 dollars; labels 9 dollars; cutting the master cost 11 dollars per side and the metalwork 15 dollars each side. Recording charges were not mentioned, although the engineer was said to have been paid 5 dollars. No advances or fees were paid to the performers, so presumably they would be paid – if at all – once the record started selling. The biggest expense was 175 dollars for promotion, bringing the total to 381 dollars. The purchase price of a single at that time was 89 cents.

The economics of running a small studio were such that its operators could expect to spend a lot of time recording meetings, weddings and other social events. The economics of running a record company were marginally better as fewer expensive overheads were involved, and rock'n'roll brought with it a boom in record sales. The figure of 1000 dollars to set up a record company, including the cost of issuing the first single, seems to have been average for American independents in the peak years of rock'n'roll. Berry Gordy spent 800 dollars on setting up Tamla Records, the precursor of Motown, in 1959 while Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller went further in setting up Spark in 1953; this was a record company, a publishing company and a distribution company all in one. But to do so the two partners had to take out a loan of 7000 dollars.

Leiber and Stoller were not only in at the start of the rock recording revolution; their stint as producers at Atlantic also spelt the beginning of the end of cheap Fifties recordings. By the end of the decade Atlantic had the first 8-track machine in the world and the company was leading the way in both technical excellence and musical sophistication, especially with Leiber and Stoller's work in recording the Coasters. Things would never be the same again.

JOHN MORRISH

The scene inside the new Columbia Records pressing plant at Pittman, New Jersey in 1961. The women are inspecting the records for blemishes.



THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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